

CHAPTER FOUR

Linking Honors Courses: A New Approach to Defining Honors Pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

The shift in higher education toward outcome-based learning represents a significant opportunity for honors. By removing disciplinary boundaries related to teaching content knowledge, outcome-based learning increases opportunities for connecting student learning across courses within well-defined honors curricula. It also empowers honors students, many of whom are eager to take leadership of their educational experiences, to extend their learning in new ways. This essay presents an example of how drawing connections across honors courses within a curriculum creates unique opportunities for engaged, transformative learning and, unexpectedly, for the development of an honors program identity.

OVERVIEW OF THE HONORS FIRST-YEAR CURRICULUM

To develop intentional strategies toward honors student learning, for the past several years, the Roger Williams University (RWU) Honors Program has been linking three separate courses within the honors program curriculum. These courses incorporate, in various configurations, the entire cohort of honors first-year students (approximately 60 students; 5% of the incoming class).

The preparation for the honors first-year courses begins in the summer prior to students' arrival at the university, via a summer assignment explicitly designed to introduce the language and pedagogy of the honors first-year experience. Once the academic year begins, all students also complete a combination of courses designed to integrate the honors learning outcomes, reinforce the shared student-learning vocabulary, and encourage students to extend their learning beyond the confines of the individual course. These courses include the following:

- HON/CORE 104: Literature, Philosophy, and the Examined Life is designed to give students practice making connections between literary and philosophical texts/concepts. This course is also designated as the Honors Living-Learning Community (LLC).
- HON 100: Foundations of Honors is a one-credit course intended to introduce students to the unique learning outcomes of our honors program. As part of this introduction to honors, all students participate in a City as Text™ (CAT) experience and initiate an honors e-portfolio.
- HON/WTNG 102: Expository Writing, How Writing Works is a required general education writing course aimed at helping students develop writing-process skills and rhetorical knowledge about how writing works in academic spheres.

All incoming first-year students are simultaneously enrolled in HON/CORE 104 and HON 100 during the fall semester; approximately two-thirds of the cohort are also enrolled in HON/WTNG 102.

The three professors teaching these courses develop an integrated course design and a shared vocabulary that create multiple opportunities for students not only to practice higher-level critical habits of mind but also to link knowledge and skills and make connections across all three courses. These goals and outcomes are chosen based upon best practices in First-Year Experience, general education, and our institution's honors program outcomes. This shared conceptual vocabulary includes

- **Question Propagation** and a “**Higher Quality of Ignorance**”: Stuart Firestein’s TED Talk, “The Pursuit of Ignorance,” works well in the classroom to privilege ignorance over knowledge by emphasizing that the value of knowledge is to produce ignorance, a point that students sometimes find paradoxical. Firestein celebrates the term “question propagation,” a concept he traces back to Immanuel Kant, who noted that “Every answer given on principle of experience begets a fresh question” (qtd. in Firestein 9:03).
- **Sustained Reflection** (a.k.a. the “slow hunch”): This practice creates tolerance for ambiguity when questions do not resolve themselves quickly and/or allows ideas to percolate over time rather than assuming that questions do or “should” have immediate, clear answers. The “slow hunch” concept is featured in Steven Johnson’s TED Talk, “Where Good Ideas Come From.”
- **Vertical Thinking**: This habit of mind deliberately slows down thinking to consider ideas with greater specificity and nuance; rather than trying to come up with “more” ideas, this process aims to add depth to current thinking.
- **Metacognition**: This happens when students think about thinking to assess their own knowledge, skills, and learning.
- **Transfer** (or “linking”): This goal occurs when students recognize moments when the knowledge or skills acquired in one class might be utilized in another, even while acknowledging differences in application.

Creating a collaborative, intentional teaching and learning environment in which all three professors use and apply these habits of mind (intentionally stressing the shared vocabulary) is key to this process. To maximize our ability to recognize when students are making connections across courses and to create both subtle and overt opportunities for them to do so, the instructors also meet weekly in person and correspond via email to share course readings, content, and highlights of class discussion. These interactions create a dynamic teaching experience that allows the instructors to supplement their instructional plans and make adjustments to align with one another, as needed.

SUMMER ASSIGNMENT AND HONORS RETREAT

The Honors Summer Assignment and Honors Retreat give students an opportunity to actively engage with the concepts described earlier. All incoming first-year honors students view two TED Talks (Stuart Firestein's "The Pursuit of Ignorance" and Steven Johnson's "Where Good Ideas Come From"), followed by a challenging writing assignment. Students are asked to analyze and deploy concepts introduced in the videos, such as question propagation, liquid networking, and pursuing a higher level of ignorance. One goal is to explode the "empty bucket" concept of learning, in which students scoop facts and concepts into the empty buckets of their minds for the primary purpose of regurgitation. In contrast, the summer assignment introduces a recursive learning paradigm of reflective inquiry, where ignorance becomes a valuable commodity, especially when catalyzed to generate questions that lead to directed or "vertical" research. To complete the three-part summer assignment, students have to recognize first the conceptual links between the two assigned TED Talks and then apply that knowledge by reverse engineering the process of question generation and the pursuit of ignorance in a completely unrelated text. (In this iteration, an essay by Malcolm Gladwell, although many thoughtful inductive essays would suffice.) The third portion of the summer essay asks students to write a 500–600 word reflection describing how the assignment develops a "higher quality of ignorance" for them. They

share these essays at the Honors Retreat, which is the day before classes begin. Students engage in conversations that are intense and positive and that turn again and again to surprise at the notion that “ignorance” could be positive and to the discomfort caused by a model of knowledge that foregrounds ambiguity.

The retreat thus both acknowledges the challenge inherent in this new paradigm and reifies abstract concepts into concrete practice. In contrast to previous years, students in our recent cohort have reported in focus groups that the summer assignment and retreat engaged them intellectually and facilitated communication. The focus on making conceptual links, propagating questions, and valuing ignorance in sustained reflection continue through the entire semester in all three fall semester courses, giving students more and more opportunities to both practice and transfer these skills.

HON/CORE 104:

LITERATURE, PHILOSOPHY, AND THE EXAMINED LIFE

In order to expand on the summer retreat discussions and the students’ understanding of both the propagation of questions and the pursuit of ignorance, on the first day of HON/CORE 104 students watch a short video of the “Question Game” from Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and play the game or, rather, try to play the game themselves. They find it extremely difficult, yet exhilarating. Students quickly learn not only that sustained question propagation is difficult but that it also leads nowhere. The professor then asks students to reflect on this activity by linking it with their summer assignment/retreat activities that had emphasized the importance of question propagation. “Is question propagation actually productive? When? How? Why?” This discussion sets the foundation for the introduction of a new critical habit of mind: sustained reflection, which is precisely what *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s* game does not allow.

CORE 104 continues this metacognitive practice across each unit of literature and philosophy. For example, when reading *The*

Analects of Confucius by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., students contrast free-association interpretations with interpretations of the same analect based on contextual reading. This process again models how to use ignorance to go vertical by asking questions and seeking information. (In this case cultural background information and specific research into key terms and concepts used throughout the *Analects*.) The new information leads to sustained reflection and the revision of initial interpretations. Students are asked to track their changing interpretations and reflect on the difference in knowledge over sustained question propagation fueled by new knowledge.

In a later unit, students tackle David Hume’s “Of Personal Identity,” typically reading only three or four paragraphs together per day. This strategy allows students a chance to practice vertical thinking. By slowing down to read these dense philosophical paragraphs closely with greater specificity rather than trying simply to paraphrase or avoid complexity by hyperlinking to tangentially related ideas, students again practice sustained reflection that allows them to change and revise their questions over time. Each unit in this course thus repeats, in varied and concrete ways, the practice of scholarly inquiry to help students build their identity as honors students and as scholars.

HON/WTNG 102:

EXPOSITORY WRITING—HOW WRITING WORKS

Approximately two-thirds of the incoming honors students are simultaneously enrolled in Expository Writing, the first of two required writing courses at RWU, which is intended to help students develop a conceptual map of how writing works by building their rhetorical and writing-process knowledge. Within this framework, the course focuses on scholarly inquiry and metacognitive practices as they relate to writing. Students focus their inquiry by exploring conceptions of literacy, beginning with researching different forms of literacy such as digital literacy, information literacy, visual literacy, numerical literacy, or cultural literacy. This initial

research into conceptions of literacy then serves as the foundation for the final assignment in the class: a literacy narrative. In their literacy narrative, students reflect on their own literacy experiences, beliefs, and practices by making them the subject of their inquiry. Kara Poe Alexander notes that literacy narratives—as a genre—“prompt [writers] to explore and reflect on how their past experiences with language, literacy, and schooling inform their perceptions of themselves as writers and literate beings” (609). In other words, the genre of literacy narrative requires the writer to reflect critically on his or her literacy behaviors, both past and present, and to draw connections between those behaviors and culturally scripted ideas about literacy.

The literacy narrative is a challenging assignment for students on multiple levels. First, it asks them to blend personal and academic writing in a single text. Many students have been trained to avoid drawing on personal experience in academic writing; in this assignment, however, they are explicitly required to use their own story as both a framework for the narrative and as a source of evidence. The second challenge afforded by the literacy narrative is the necessity of reexamining their own experiences. Contextualizing a pivotal moment in their literacy development by putting it in conversation with others’ arguments about literacy requires them to articulate what they now understand that they did not before. In other words, it is not sufficient for the literacy narrative to tell a story about a reading or writing experience when they were younger; the narrative assignment demands that students challenge or complicate their own as well as culturally scripted beliefs about literacy.

Throughout the class, and especially while working on the literacy narrative assignment, we make explicit connections to the work students have done in their HON/CORE 104 and HON 100 classes. We consider how their work with question generation might apply in this situation where they are asking questions about literacy and about their own experiences; we use a shared vocabulary, such as the idea of vertical questions that move beyond surface-level concerns for more nuanced investigations; and, of course, the assignment

itself requires sustained reflection as they re-examine their own experiences in light of their research findings relating to what others have to say about literacy. Of particular importance to them seems to be the opportunity to develop their metacognitive skills by reflecting on their own reading and writing experiences and by making connections to their research. One student observed:

It was interesting to delve back into the past and critically evaluate how a particular experience with literacy shaped me as a learner. Focusing on concrete details in the narrative component of my essay and making effective connections to my sources was a challenging, but enjoyable process.

While students respond with varying degrees of enthusiasm to the challenges of this assignment, most of them ultimately find value in it, especially as they recognize how it resonates with the skills and concepts they have been practicing in their linked honors classes.

HON 100:

FOUNDATIONS OF HONORS

This one-credit course introduces students to the learning goals of our honors program through common pedagogical approaches within honors, notably City as Text™ (CAT) and the honors e-portfolio. Of special importance to this chapter, students complete a series of CAT experiences that teach students systematic approaches for integrating traditional and experiential-learning approaches within our honors curriculum, particularly HON/CORE 104 and HON/WTNG 102, the other honors first-year experience courses. Honors CAT opportunities, as Ellen Hostetter notes, promote student engagement beyond the confines of the classroom and encourage student application of knowledge to the local community (63). (For additional readings about CAT, see Braid and Long, *Place as Text*; Machonis, *Shatter the Glassy Stare*; and Long, *Writing on Your Feet*.) Through the honors CAT activities, students build upon the Honors Summer Assignment and the other honors first-year courses to practice skills critical to the transfer or linking of learning,

including the propagation of questions, vertical thinking, and sustained reflections.

The honors CAT assignments require students to practice a particular methodological sequence involving the following skills: observations, engagement, reflection, and inquiry. The assignments enable students to experience multiple CAT encounters with the history and people of a region and with a primed awareness of the area's most pressing social and community concerns. Building upon traditional CAT approaches, students receive instruction and feedback regarding social science methodologies for conducting naturalistic observations, for engaging and interviewing community members, and for building upon these experiential components to generate new scholarly questions. These experiences represent the foundational levels of the program's learning outcomes.

Equally importantly, the experiences also provide opportunities to connect with and reinforce students' learning in HON/CORE 104 and HON/WTNG 102. Through the Honors CAT experiences, students build upon their observations and engagements with the community to design new questions regarding the history, economy, and sociology of the place and its people.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

To assess our experimentation with linked courses in the Honors First-Year Experience, we ask students to write about the connections they recognized. Students in Expository Writing finish the semester by writing a final metacognitive piece that asks them to reflect on meaningful connections they have found between the knowledge and skills acquired in this course and in other RWU courses, especially in the other linked honors courses. Most students focus their final reflections on the connections they have found across the classes in terms of practicing question propagation and sustained reflection. They describe being asked to think vertically in ways that have not previously been required of them. As one student points to the significant correlations he found between HON/WTNG 102 and HON/CORE 104, he explains:

With assignments such as the Omelas Response, Confucian Analect Analysis, and Hume Close Reading [in HON/CORE 104], we gained experience with concepts and practices that mirror and enhance much of what we were also learning and doing in [HON/]WTNG 102: . . . sustained reflection; synthesis; collaboration; making meaning; deepening understanding.

He goes on to say that he believes those experiences “enable us/me to build a habit of reflection to generate more thoughts, questions, and ideas for future research and writing.” While ascertaining whether this student would have found the same significant value in the concepts we studied and practiced across the first-year honors courses if his exposure had been via one class rather than all three is impossible, that he viewed those experiences as habit-building and that he explicitly articulated the link between these classes signal that we are on the right track in our curriculum development.

Similarly, another student details how metacognition and vertical thinking have connected the three honors classes, explaining how she has applied them to three different assignments. Her reflection focuses more specifically on the details of her approach to these assignments and specifically on how she went vertical in research for her HON 100 City as Text assignment. Researching in this way, reflecting on what she was finding, and then developing new questions have had a significant impact on her thinking.

“Going vertical” in my research changed the way I understand racism in Rhode Island. Prior to conducting the CAT, I was aware of systemic oppression throughout the United States, but I was disturbed to see how ingrained white privilege is throughout Rhode Island. I was able to apply the metacognitive knowledge that I had acquired in WTNG 102 to reflect on my role in bringing awareness to racism and how to write honestly about this serious subject, especially in the light of the BlackOut and the racist backlash that occurred on our own campus.

When viewed alongside the other reflections, most of which echo similar sentiments, albeit with less detail, this passage and statements from the other students demonstrate that students are indeed transferring the knowledge and skills acquired in one setting to others and doing so in ways that are meaningful to them both academically and personally.

The students' end-of-semester reflections are only one mechanism for assessment, and we recognize, of course, that because the reflections are a final assignment, they are far from objective. The near unanimity, however, with which students have discussed how important developing good questions, thinking vertically, and sustaining reflection are across all three courses suggests that students are recognizing the value of transferring their learning across the curriculum. Importantly, moreover, we note that the students' reflections on the connections they have found across the linked honors courses are unsurprising in that they comment on the habits-of-mind and shared conceptual vocabulary we have developed to connect the Honors FYE courses. That these final student comments confirm that they learned what we were trying to teach them is certainly gratifying, but it is also predictable.

What we did not predict, and were delighted to discover resulting from this experiment in a linked curriculum, is the development of our programmatic identity. We initiated this Honors First-Year Experience as we were developing the learning domains for our program outcomes: scholarly inquiry, community engagement, and the public sphere. We chose the habits of mind/shared vocabulary for transfer with the program outcomes in mind, but we did not emphasize the program outcomes in our respective courses. We have discovered that students intuitively connect the habits-of-mind and conceptual vocabulary from their courses to the honors program, as much as if to say question propagation and sustained reflection are what we do in honors. In other words, they draw the connections between the work of the classes and the honors program as a whole, articulating in those connections a programmatic identity.

Focus groups for the 2018 cohort reveal that students who participated in the linked FYE believe the honors curriculum encourages and facilitates scholarly inquiry, and they understand the importance of communicating scholarly activity to public audiences. In short, for them, the program outcomes differentiate the honors program from their other courses at the university. In contrast, students who entered the program before the linked FYE curriculum, such as the focus groups for the 2016 cohort, perceive little difference between the honors courses and their other courses at the university. Although we did not intend for our linked curriculum to be a means of building program identity, it has been deeply significant. Students now have a better sense of what they are committing to when they join the honors program. According to the focus group reports for the 2018 cohort, the honors experience “lived up to and exceeded expectations.” This assessment is of no small consequence for a program like ours, in which the curriculum is delivered largely by honors sections of the general education courses that all students take. By consistently reminding students that sustained inquiry in the pursuit of ignorance provides training in the highest standards of academic excellence, perhaps we help them not only to transition into college but also to define themselves within the community of scholars.

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