"Breaking Barriers in Teaching and Learning" - Honors Components in Honors Faculty Development

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CHAPTER FIVE

Honors Components in Honors Faculty Development

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we describe the design characteristics of a professional development course about honors teaching. We claim that the principles of learning and teaching in honors are also applicable to the design of a course for honors faculty.

The context of our research is Utrecht University in The Netherlands, a large and high-ranking research university that offers undergraduate and graduate programs in a wide variety of academic disciplines. Dutch higher education does not have a longstanding
tradition in honors; Utrecht University was among the first research universities that started experimenting with honors programs in the 1990s. The rationale was to offer extra challenges and space for experimentation to high-performing and motivated students. Honors developed rapidly, and today Utrecht University has a university-wide honors program as well as honors opportunities for students in all schools and departments.

Further development of honors is one of the strategic goals of the university. An important project in this context is the professional development of honors teachers. That is why the university’s Center of Excellence in University Teaching (CEUT) started a course in honors teaching in 2011. The design of this professional development course about honors teaching was based on some of the key principles of honors pedagogy: creation of a learning community, substantial freedom for the learners within a structured context, and academic challenge. We claim that these honors principles, built into the course, largely explain the success of the course in terms of learning outcomes.

Our chapter is based on evidence from the first three honors teaching courses offered at Utrecht University. We use the outcomes of the course evaluations as well as interviews with alumni of the three courses. These interviews were conducted a few months after completion of the course in order to verify participants’ perception of the quality of the course and the learning outcomes.

The second part of this chapter focuses on this central question: to what extent have the design principles of our professional development course about honors teaching, based on key notions of honors pedagogy, made an impact on the learning outcomes? Before exploring an answer, we shall discuss the characteristics of honors pedagogy as put forward in the research literature. And we shall describe the design of the honors teaching course and its outcomes for the participants. We end with a conclusion and discussion on the merits of these findings.
HONORS PEDAGOGY

The body of empirical academic literature on effective teaching approaches for honors students in higher education is limited (Achterberg, Clark, Rinn and Plucker, and Scager). Most of the available literature is descriptive in nature and based on case studies. A considerable amount of empirical research literature, however, about pedagogy for gifted students in primary and secondary schools claims the effectiveness of certain teaching strategies. In this descriptive and empirical literature, three principles stand out as prerequisites for honors pedagogy: enhancing academic competence, offering freedom in what and how students want to learn, and creating a community (Wolfensberger).

Enhancing academic competence is essential to honors education, where the emphasis is generally placed on enhancing the depth and scope of students’ academic knowledge rather than on speeding up and offering students “more of the same.” Acceleration can play a role in combination with enrichment, but it is not a goal in itself. Honors learning activities, according to Cheryl Achterberg, are rich both in their theoretical component and in their relationships to practice; they challenge students intellectually and promote integration, a multidisciplinary approach, critical thinking, and the handling of rich study materials. This approach suits the needs of honors students, writes Donald P. Kaczvinsky, “who are more academically confident, have greater intellectual interests, and are more willing to challenge their accepted values, beliefs, and ideas” (93). Gifted students do not feel challenged by the typical pre-structured courses that dominate most of education. The standard learning activities do not fit the needs of honors students who seek enrichment, differentiation, acceleration, and better and advanced lessons (Reis and Renzulli). Higher-level thinking skills and inquiry-based learning fit these requirements (Shore and Kanevsky, Van Tassel-Baska and Brown) as well as discovery learning, less scaffolding, less structure (Snow and Swanson), and situated learning (Gruber and Mandl).

A second important element in the design of honors education, Marca V. C. Wolfensberger suggests, is offering the freedom to
make one’s own choices. In combination with rich learning activities, freedom offers students challenge. Karen B. Rogers states that, besides the enhancement of academic competence by consistent challenge and focus on depth and complexity, providing opportunities to work independently is important in the development of gifted students in primary and secondary education. Lannie S. Kanevsky and Tracey Keighley found that giving students more choice and control over their learning helped gifted high school students to overcome their boredom. Research also presents clues for the role of the teacher. High-ability students prefer a caring teacher who allows student autonomy (Kanevsky and Keighley, Marra and Palmer).

Pierre J. Van Eijl, Marca V. C. Wolfensberger, and Albert Pilot emphasize the importance of community building for and with groups of honors students. Constructivist learning theories that argue that knowledge is constructed in interaction with others support this claim. The learning community boosts productive interaction among students, teachers, and other professionals, which leads to enhanced learning experiences for students (Van Ginkel et al.). In addition, within the community activities students have the opportunity to develop skills that are related to the character of the honors program, such as organizational and leadership skills (Van Ginkel et al.).

All three components are important. They are all conducive to an optimal learning climate for honors students. Honors pedagogy, of course, is not limited to giving extra work; instead, it constitutes a different way of working in a stimulating environment with peers. Activating the three components allows a viable alternative to simply adding to workloads in honors.

Motivational theories offer validation of the importance of the three components. Self-determination theory has proven to be useful in explaining the variation in students’ learning strategies, performance, and persistence: “People whose motivation is authentic . . .” argue Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, “have more interest, excitement, and confidence, which in turn is manifested both as enhanced performance, persistence and creativity and
as heightened vitality, self-esteem, and general well-being” (69). The self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan states that much of human motivation is based on a set of innate psychological needs: competence, self-determination, and interpersonal relatedness. The three principles identified as essential to honors pedagogy—academic competence, autonomy, community—are closely related to these three needs. Mastering challenging academic tasks, academic competence, enhances a more general feeling of competence. An environment in which students have some autonomy and can make choices will support the feeling of self-determination, which again fuels intrinsic motivation. Relatedness—feelings connected with significant others—is an important aspect of a community.

**THE HONORS TEACHING COURSE**

Theories on honors pedagogy and motivational theories underpin the design of our honors teaching course. The format of our faculty development course about honors teaching was based on the model of Utrecht University’s longstanding educational leadership course, organized by its Center of Excellence in University Teaching (CEUT). Hetty Grunefeld and Theo Wubbels regard this substantial leadership course as very successful; thus, for our course we adopted a number of the organizing principles of that leadership course:

- Select participants, a maximum of 16 faculty members from a wide range of schools and departments, to be in the group;

- Make sure that the participants have ample opportunity for bonding and for informal conversation;

- Bring in experts who can combine insights about state-of-the-art pedagogy with an interactive approach and who allow for the participants to link their own experiences;

- Make participants carry out an intervention in their own honors teaching; the interventions carry on throughout the course and are regularly discussed during the meetings in
small subgroups of three to four members, who query and give suggestions to each other about their intervention;

• Provide the participants with a “Reading Table” of rich literature and research resources from which they can choose, depending on their own questions and needs;

• Allow for discussion and debate about all aspects of the course, particularly about the relationships between course content and the teaching practices of the participants;

• Choose course locations where the participants are really away from their daily routines.

These design components reflect some of the key success factors of professional development for teachers, as identified by Michael S. Garet et al.: actively engaging participants in the process, creating cohesion among the various components of a professionalization course, and focusing on participants’ domain of academic expertise and related pedagogies. Kurt W. Clausen, Anna-Marie Aquino, and Ron Wideman have shown that collaborative learning in a team or group is also a success factor in professional development; this is also the case for the use of reflection on action, as in our interventions in the teacher’s own educational setting. Participants judge how successful their interventions were and whether changes to what they did could have resulted in different outcomes. This reflection-on-action occurs in the collegial consultation rounds that occur regularly within the course. Figure 1 summarizes the course format.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Figure 1 shows that the first two meetings of our honors teaching course focus on the introduction and discussion of evidence-based knowledge about honors teaching. Since we consider the first three executions of the courses here, we have data about six such meetings. The participants, all of them experienced teachers, were positive about their growth in knowledge and understanding with regard to learning and teaching in honors:
Honors Faculty Development

- 4.5 or higher on a five-point Likert scale for four meetings;
- 4.1 for a fifth meeting;
- and a disappointing 3.4 for the one meeting where one guest speaker did not present strong empirical evidence about aspects of honors teaching and did not succeed in relating to the participants in a way that invited discussion and debate.

The panel evaluations during the third meeting of each course confirm that the participants were satisfied with the course, reported that they gained many new insights, and were eager to continue peer conversation about their honors teaching after the course. They reported that they felt empowered to understand honors students’ needs and to improve their honors teaching. Another comment that many participants shared was that they perceived the course’s theoretical insights—linked to honors practice—as very useful. Here is one typical comment: “The lectures, the discussions, the input from a variety of honors programs—it changed me. It lifted me to a higher level of understanding.”

Fourteen participants provided extensive feedback after the course, either in their response to a semi-open questionnaire (first group only) or in an interview (all groups). Almost all of them have changed their approach and practices in honors teaching as a result of the course. Many of them report that they now realize that honors education is largely about moving “out of your comfort zone,” not only for the students but also for themselves as teachers. As a result they have started to experiment more in their honors classes and to create more variation in their teaching approaches. Importantly, some of the respondents report that thanks to the course they now dare to be more authentic. One participant wrote, “The course made me feel more secure and safe in my honors teaching. . . . I feel freer to make changes in my classes, to experiment, and to use tools for reflection by the students. . . . I dare to embrace my new ideas and to use them in classroom practice.” Two participants report that they now have more personal contacts with their honors students as a result of the course. One of them said, “I take more time to listen to my students, not only about their reflection,
but also during classroom discussions. I notice that I succeed better in creating a rather silent, intensive thinking zone in which all of us together create new knowledge.” Another respondent told us that

**Figure 1: Format of Course on Honors Teaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group of 16 max. participants, 2 course supervisors.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intake: inventory of project ideas and learning questions of participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meeting 1—Various sessions throughout days in a conference hotel</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round of introductions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What characterizes the ‘honors student’ (research evidence)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is special about honors pedagogy (research evidence—guest speaker)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What teacher characteristics and teacher skills are important in honors teaching (research evidence—guest speaker)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ample time for questions, discussion, debate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two rounds of small-group discussion about the planned interventions in the participants’ own honors teaching practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for bonding and informal discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for scanning the “Reading Table” of resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developments in honors at Utrecht University.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Between meetings 1 and 2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants work on intervention projects in their honors teaching (“trying out an innovation”).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants meet individually with one of the supervisors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meeting 2—8 hour session (9 to 5) in a conference center</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>(About two months after meeting 1)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Two more specific topics—chosen on the basis of expressed interest of the group (during meeting 1)—are presented by guest speakers. For example:
he has developed a more tailor-made approach to his students: “I stimulate them to discover and follow their personal ambitions and areas of interest, using the freedom that their program offers them.”

— Creating a learning community
— Reflection and portfolio in honors
— Group / project work in honors

Ample time for questions, discussion, debate.

One round of small-group discussion about the ongoing interventions in the participants’ own honors teaching practice.

Time for bonding and informal discussion.

Between meetings 2 and 3

Participants work on intervention projects in their honors teaching ("trying out an innovation").

Participants meet individually with one of the supervisors.

Meeting 3—4 hour session (1 to 5) at Utrecht University

(About six weeks after meeting 2)

Participants present posters about their interventions.

Participants speak in sub-groups about the learning outcomes of the course as a whole.

Discussion between course group and an external panel of experts (about presented posters and about learning outcomes).

Evaluation of the course plus informal gathering.
Many respondents report similar changes in their honors pedagogy as a result of the professional development course about honors teaching. Although teachers use different wording to make this clear, their answers confirm that the course helped them to develop more of a prospect view of the essentials of honors teaching and to incorporate this perspective into their teaching practice:

I became more critical about the format of my honors seminars. . . . I reflect more on the honors program and feel able to offer students more freedom.

The course helped me to become aware of what the honors student is and what this means for teaching and learning.

I changed my course in such a way that students talk, discuss and participate more. For that I changed some assignments. I am more conscious of what is happening in class, I have a better sense of the nuances.

Another aspect of our work is the effect of the course on the selection of honors students. One of the teachers, who is also responsible for honors admissions in her department, reported:

I have a clearer sense now of what characterizes the honors student. It is not just about top grades, but also about drive, motivation, about what they are able and willing to do. It changed my perception of honors candidates. What do they want to get out of their honors program? My ideas about honors students have changed, and so has my approach in admissions.

Many of the comments suggest that participants in the course have gained more self-confidence in their honors teaching and are willing to take more risks. Some of the comments were rather explicit about this shift:

The course gave me more self-confidence and made me less inclined to plan everything in detail. I think that I already
was quite flexible in my classes, but I found it scary. After all, I wanted to be in control. I feel confirmed that I was on the right track, but I did not do enough. Now I feel that I do not need to be in control all the time. I allow unexpected things to happen in class, and this is fine.

Some of the participants, mostly very experienced teachers, report that they have changed very little or nothing in their honors teaching because of the course but that they feel reassured and more firm about their ideas and practices. One of them phrased this observation as follows:

I have learned how to look at honors. I interpret honors education in more positive terms. I see that this is useful for students: helping them to become citizens, to develop their leadership potential, to become judicious, to be better people. It makes sense to tailor opportunities for students at the top end of the motivation and ability curves. Not that I changed as a teacher. But I did change in communicating what I see as important. In the course, I recognized a lot of what we discussed about honors pedagogy, I recognized my beliefs, and I can now see this in a wider context.

All available evidence suggests that our professional development course about honors teaching has solid and meaningful learning outcomes. As designers of the course, we assume that this success is largely based on the fact that the course emphasizes important characteristics of honors pedagogy: challenging academic content, a degree of freedom for the participants to direct their learning, and the creation of a strong learning community.

**PRINCIPLES OF HONORS PEDAGOGY IN FACULTY DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH DESIGN**

The remainder of this chapter explores to what extent the teachers themselves ascribe the positive learning outcomes of this course to these three components.
The first three honors teaching courses offered at Utrecht University jointly had 38 participating teachers (11, 14, 13 in each cohort). They were from all divisions of the university: humanities and social sciences; natural and life sciences and the medical school; veterinarian sciences; the division of law, economics, and governance; geosciences; and the two undergraduate honors colleges of the university. The standard procedure was that the participants filled in evaluation forms after the first and second meeting and engaged in an oral overall evaluation during the third session. The evaluation forms had open spaces in which the teachers could indicate what they perceived to be the main strong points and improvement points of any of the meetings. The non-directed responses reveal much about what participants see as key success factors of the course. The overall group evaluation during the third and final session was largely self-organized by the participants; therefore, it also provided spontaneous feedback about what the teachers see as factors that explain the strong learning outcomes of the course.

Moreover, we conducted seven in-depth interviews with teachers who had participated in one of the three courses. Part of the interview was about what in particular had inspired them most during the course. This element also provided non-directed and spontaneous feedback. During the final part of each interview, we explained our assumption that three specific characteristics of the course (challenging academic content, a certain amount of freedom for the participants, and community) might explain the course’s success. We wanted to see how they would react to this statement. Their reactions are the only guided feedback that appear in the next section.

RESULTS

Community

Sessions one and two of the three groups resulted in more than 70 completed evaluation forms. One of the open questions was
what the participants valued as the most positive aspects of the session. The results show that they particularly valued the course group (including the two course supervisors) as a learning community. Teachers mentioned this point in 44 of the forms. Figure 2 is a compilation of this spontaneous feedback about the learning community as the most cherished feature of the course.

The final evaluations of all three courses reinforce the notion that functioning as a learning community was an essential ingredient of our professional development course. The course was intentionally designed in a way that would facilitate the creation of a learning community. The participants had time and space for meeting informally and for small-group discussion. Moreover, the small group size (11, 13, 14 participants per course) and the interactive format worked out well. Most participants indicated that they liked to continue interacting with the group after completing the course.

The teachers who were interviewed all confirm how important the community aspect of the course has been for their learning.

**Figure 2. The Honors Teaching Course as a Community: Some Feedback**

All of them indicate that their colleagues have been an important source of inspiration in the course. What they told us in more detail largely overlaps with the outcomes of the evaluation forms. (See Figure 2.)

**Competence**

Another component that spontaneously came up in the evaluation forms was appreciation for solid, state-of-the-art academic content, evidence-based approaches, plus critical reflection on course content. Such points were mentioned in 24 of the evaluation forms. Figure 3 shows some of the feedback that falls into this category.

The final evaluation panels and the interviews confirmed that the participants appreciated that the guest speakers were knowledgeable, open to debate, and able to present information based on honors research and reflective classroom experiments. The participants felt that the guest speakers and the course supervisors addressed them as experienced teachers and academics whose questions, criticisms, and experiences were welcomed in all the discussions. In one of the interviews, a participant commented, “It was important to get theoretical underpinning of various aspects of

**Figure 3. The Honors Teaching Course as Academically Solid: Some Feedback**

honors, and to discuss this with your peers.” She added that she had liked the course format of “stepping out of your routine, go[ing] in depth, and [addressing] topics at an appropriate level.” Another interviewed teacher stressed the importance for him to “be brought in contact with good and up-to-date academic literature about honors, to meet experts, and to study academic research articles about honors and related theories.” The feedback from many teachers emphasized that it had been essential for them to link new insights to something practical, as they were supposed to do in their interventions (experimental changes in their own honors teaching, over the four- to five-month period between the first and last session). In this way their newly gained understandings became more rooted and internalized.

**Autonomy or Freedom**

Fewer teachers spontaneously responded that they saw the level of freedom that they had within the course setting as a strong point: 16 noted this element in the evaluation forms. Nevertheless, they clearly recognized that freedom was an important quality of the course and that it allowed participants to bring their personal questions and concerns to the discussion, to choose their interventions, and even to co-decide on priority themes for the second course meetings. Figure 4 captures some of the remarks that the participants made about the notion of freedom.

**Figure 4. The Honors Teaching Course as a Space with Freedom: Some Feedback**

Having time to talk. Space for exchange of views. Participant preferences taken into account. Open atmosphere for conversation. A lot of space for discussion and for exchanging experiences. Time for reflection. Good that we have individual meetings about our intervention projects. Time to think. Good that we can bring up our own honors issues.
The interviews made clear that the overall community atmosphere of the course, with its openness and time for conversation, helped to create a sense of freedom to bring any questions or concerns to the discussion, to suggest themes or approaches for the following meeting, to deviate from structured assignments for small-group work, to choose what to read from the reading table and the course materials, and to set personal learning goals. All participants had complete autonomy in deciding about their personal intervention, the experiment in their own honors teaching, that was part of the course.

Clearly, every one of the three design components is important. Community building creates the climate for learning from and with each other in the free space that is offered in the program. A good learning climate in which the participants act positively and openly and recognize each other’s drive and experience forms the base for open exchange and reflection on the applicability of theoretical notions. Furthermore, participants are free to choose a project for the duration of the course that is challenging for them and useful to themselves and their department. For this, they seek theoretical underpinnings as well as input from the experience of other participants in the course.

**CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

Our initial assumption was that the three major design components of honors education for students—enhancing academic competence, offering freedom in what and how they want to learn, and creating a community—are also valid for professional development of their teachers. The results of this study validate the claim. The teachers who participated in our courses on honors teaching spontaneously mentioned these three notions in their answers to open questions in evaluations and interviews. Of these three, the positive effect of community on the learning process is mentioned the most. The participants value this component highly and recognize the components in the course format that constitute community building. The planned time for exchange was very valuable. Community building was stimulated by the engagement, the drive
for good education, and the experience in honors teaching that they recognized in each other. This phenomenon supports the belief of the Center of Excellence in University Teaching that considerable knowledge and experience within departments could stimulate further university-wide development of honors education.

Complementing the reported chief value of community building in the course was our design to offer participants the theoretical underpinnings of honors pedagogy and to challenge them to transfer insights to their own educational practice. This emphasis also created a valuable learning experience, and while freedom was less recognized as a design component, the participants reported that this aspect was still an important factor in their learning experience.

In this chapter we have studied the design characteristics of a professional development course about honors teaching for teachers of Utrecht University in The Netherlands. Although we draw our conclusions from one course format, in our opinion the results are valuable for other institutions that want to further the professionalization of their college and university teachers; the benefits of a course such as ours is made abundantly clear in Utrecht University’s longstanding CEUT educational leadership course (Grunefeld & Wubbels). A design based on the three studied design components offers the potential for a broader implementation. Further research in honors and non-honors courses, however, can lead to stronger corroborating evidence for the positive impact of a course designed for university teachers with emphasis on freedom to discuss relevant subjects for their own practice, respectful collaboration among experts, discussion of evidence from theory, and engagement in community building.

From our experience in working with honors teachers, we identified comparable characteristics in honors teachers as in honors students. These teachers actively desire to pursue educational opportunities to remain current and to understand the needs of their students: they are willing to academically challenge themselves, they are flexible, they are creative in their educational practice, and they are willing to go the extra mile for their students. According to Reis and Renzulli, a definition of gifted students
includes the components of intelligence, creativity, and motivation. Scager divides these components into six factors of talented students: intelligence, creative thinking, openness to experience, persistence, the desire to learn, and the drive to excel. This similarity in needs and characteristics between honors students and their faculty could explain why the same design components in educational formats fit both groups.

WORKS CITED


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