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Portable Widgets and Techie Tattoos: Honors of the Future

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Just twenty-five years ago, in 1982, Gray Austin from Ohio State was the NCHC President. William Daniel from Winthrop College was the program chair for the NCHC conference that was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The conference fee was $46 and a room at the Hilton cost $37 a night. Writing Across the Curriculum was big news, and interdisciplinary seminars centered on the Great Books concept were a major component of honors programs. Today, there are honors programs and colleges at large and small universities, colleges, and community colleges. Service Learning is big news as is Outcomes Assessment. Honors curricula are much broader, incorporating many fields and emphasizing research. Given the importance of honors education at many institutions, especially public colleges and universities, and given the changes that have taken place in honors over the last twenty-five years, what can we speculate about its future?

Traditionally institutions have organized content into disciplines and further divided these disciplines into smaller sub-fields, each to be mastered by the student in a prescribed curriculum. Honors programs, however, have encouraged students to examine the links between disciplines. Instead of fragmenting knowledge into subjects and segregating learners by majors, most honors programs have developed curricula that allow students to look at problems and topics from a variety of disciplines and perspectives.

In addition, honors education has always been at the forefront of experimentation and innovation. NCHC's Honors Semesters, City as Text™, Partners in the Park, and Satellite Seminars are a few examples. Honors programs have invented and designed pioneering programs and curricula intended to enhance the education of students and offer more than they would get in a "regular" course. This trend will continue in the future where learning will be continuous, relevant, and adaptive.

We live in a diverse world, a fact complicated by the emergence of a young wired generation that is rebelling against passive listening to teachers. Their experience with technology—using mobile phones, instant messaging, podcasting, search engines, virtual tours, blogs, clickers, computer-and-video games, iTunes, e-portfolios, message boards, streaming video, online newsgroups, and wikis—gives students the capacity to do more things at once, to shift rapidly from one context to another, to be more literate in images and

multi-media than in reading text. They respond to hands-on, interactive, collaborative project-based learning. They are consummate multi-taskers. Students today are accustomed to being fully engaged and will become even more so in twenty-five years when even their tattoos and body piercings might be technologized.

Graphic tees of today will be elevated to another dimension. Students of the future will walk into a classroom wearing outfits made not of cloth but of digital fabric displaying images and text for all to see. Already we have computer-generated camouflage uniforms worn by the military that can avoid detection from satellites. Learning resources such as textbooks and computers will be much more immediate and available. Surfaces such as desks and even paper will be used to display information. We will be able to touch certain parts of digital paper or books to activate sounds and see 3-D images of historical figures or characters in a novel, for example.

Classes of the future will depend on wireless technology—information will be pod cast, streamed, downloaded, shared, and available on half-inch to 200-inch screens. Today we have mobile phones that can send email, browse the Web, and stay in touch. Future technology will produce multi-core processors that can morph into televisions, game consoles, or credit cards.

Typical honors learning environments will include technical infrastructure and adaptable classrooms. They will be Interactive Learning Centers made of pre-fabricated materials that can be dismantled and reassembled to meet changing needs. They will contain such options as virtual-reality pods in which students can experience the class topic in a more immediate way. If studying biology, for example, students will be able through a pod to enter the circulatory system and see first-hand how it works. If studying history, a student might be among the throngs of revolutionaries who called for the head of Marie Antoinette. Many classes will be more like "The Magic School Bus" that my granddaughter watches on television.

Although dynamic discussion, spirited debate, and meaningful mentorship will remain the basis for honors interaction, the delivery of information will be different. Honors educators will have to teach students how to filter information, how to reason and make judgments, and how to form ethical value systems for themselves. Instructors will help students demystify subject matter through more direct academic encounters.

Honors programs will continue to work with students to encourage analysis, application, inquiry, comparison, synthesis, and research. Objective tests and rote memorization will be passé. Assignments will be sequenced so that for each assignment students will apply previous knowledge to new ideas and thus become increasingly sophisticated learners and knowers. Rather than acquiring knowledge outside the context in which it will be used, students in honors will be asked to complete assignments designed around real-world issues and problems. Honors instructors will continue to serve as coaches or facilitators rather than the sole authorities or experts; they will allow students to help set the pace

and direction of learning and will guide them to come up with their own questions and answers.

Thomas Friedman writes that the latest world revolution is found in the fact that the power of the Internet makes it possible for individuals to collaborate and compete globally. In twenty-five years, this free flow of information will blur current national boundaries as they are replaced by city-states, corporation-based cultural groupings, and/or other geographically diverse and reconfigured human organizations tied together by global networks.

Sophisticated online search engines will lead learners to specific details, discarded after their use and resurrected when necessary. Unlike the one-right-answer problems that students solve in today's textbooks, future learners will engage in problems that are context-dependent, complicated, messy, and that recurrent in diverse guises. Motivation will change, and rates of comprehension and retention will increase as well. Emphasis will be on learning *how* rather than learning *what*.

Unbounded by geography, through simulated virtual world sights, sounds and sensations of actually being there, honors programs will be linked so that students can study anywhere. Virtual tools, personal intelligent tutors, and digital libraries and museums will be common. The Perseus Project at Tufts University, a digital library in the humanities, links materials in ancient languages, translations, commentary, and multi-media for the study of ancient Greek culture. The Valley of the Shadows at the University of Virginia is a digital archive that includes thousands of original letters and diaries, newspapers and speeches, census and church records from the Civil War era. Both of these are good examples of what will become the norm.

What we have been doing is trying to adapt our computer and web-based systems to a model of education consistent with a bygone era, complete with central control, standardization, and top-down administration of courses, tests, and degrees. This strategy will not work in the future. We will have to adjust our ways of teaching and learning to new tools and techniques.

I see large-scale collaboration whereby students will work with colleagues and professors all around the world. Students will be able to visit museums, exhibitions, libraries, historic archives, and virtual galleries, where they can converse with famous/infamous people via digital holograms. Honors students interested in Arab poetry, for instance, can collaborate with Middle Eastern professors and students. They will be able to look at images from a space telescope in order to study active geysers on Enceladus or explore the oceans of slush on Europa. They will be able to study first hand Spain's Rio Tinto where creatures that never see sunlight feed on acid and rocks.

In a bewildering array of information and resources, we will be confronted with more information than we can handle, and much of it, unfortunately, will continue to be of poor quality. "We must redesign learning to do much more than deal with subjects. We need to know the sources of our information and of our beliefs and do reality checks" (Ayres). We have to be careful

not to distort priorities or be lulled into believing that gadgets can fix all of our problems.

Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz (1989) have insisted that information-age technology presented society with enormous risks as well as possibilities. After a decade of creating groupware to help people work together on-line, they no longer believed in simple visions of connectivity. "Connecting people without clear purposes, processes, and norms to guide their interactions, results in scattered and sporadic activity." To address their concerns, they began to explore new ways of incorporating "active listening, explicit group processes and activities, emotional safety, mutual encouragement and reminders of the sacred." Honors programs must become the providers of learning spaces, whether formal or informal, virtual or real, which will be safe environments for experimentation and failure.

In twenty-five years, there will be less use of productivity tools and more use of cognitive tools for conversation, analysis, prototype construction, scenarios, simulation, reflection, and insight. These new tools will lead to ethical debates and to the development of personal standards and evaluation criteria in building team norms. Students will be encouraged to become participants in many varied learning environments like international study and collaborative organizations such as the current Model United Nations Program with students from around the world.

Honors programs and colleges will continue to prepare students for successful careers, enriched lives, and active engagement as U.S. and global citizens. They will continue to develop self-directed, integrative, intentional learners who are empowered, informed, responsible, and thoughtfully reflective about their education. The new modes of accomplishing these goals, though, might look more like Star Trek than today's predominant lectures, tutorials, and seminar discussions.

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