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LUKE VASSILIOU

# Learning by Leading and Leading by Teaching: A Student-Led Honors Seminar

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## INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2004, the honors program at the two-year Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College offered six core classes and two one-hour seminars for the Honors students, and nothing else. The classes themselves were rewarding for both students and teachers and encouraged student participation, but since the program's existence was limited to the space within the classroom walls, it had low visibility on campus and none beyond our campus. As a new (and completely inexperienced) honors director, I consulted both the NCHC executive committee's statement of "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" (1994) and Rew Godow's article on "Honors Program Leadership" (*Forum for Honors*). Both documents emphasized the multiple functions of honors programs beyond the classroom and the variety of roles for an honors program administrator, so the first apparent step the program needed beyond curriculum was the creation of an honors student association. Students quickly took the initiative in the effort once I brought up the idea; in the first year alone our student association got the award for highest fundraising amount for Relay for Life on campus and we initiated events that enhance the campus feeling of community. Creating a social branch of the program and increasing visibility on campus were by themselves a significant accomplishment, yet we were still a long way from the goalpost set by the NCHC and Rew Godow. We were also faced with realities beyond our control: Tifton, Georgia, is a small rural town among other similar towns, and our college enrollment was no more than 3,000 students at that time (the honors program had a total of 40 students in the freshman and sophomore years). If students were to gain more leadership experience, more opportunities were needed.

I had to examine my own assumptions that such opportunities happen through extra-curricular activities alone. I had already noticed that many of the honors students from the area were involved in church groups and Bible study sessions where they did assume leadership positions in managing discussions and organizing sessions; many students had also been members of groups such as 4H or FFA, the latter a completely student-run organization. Ironically, then,

## LEARNING BY LEADING AND LEADING BY TEACHING

students had come to see their churches and extracurricular clubs as institutions that entrusted them with power more than the academic world did. Clearly our students had background and potential in assuming leadership roles, but having freshman students lead a seminar all on their own was still somewhat of an academic taboo. My own previous experience when I started as a graduate teaching assistant fresh out of a bachelor's program in English was a reminder that sometimes the only way to learn how to do something is to actually do it. Out of these needs and thoughts, an experiment was born. In the spring of 2005, I restructured the honors spring seminar so that it would no longer be led by an honors faculty member. Instead, the honors director would coach students outside the classroom to prepare them to run the seminar themselves. The first semester of their college career would thus be a prelude to becoming teachers in the second semester.

### PREPARATION

In our program, honors students take two one-hour seminars: the first focused on self, society, and citizenship, and the second on science and nature. I hypothesized that after a semester's worth of seminar discussions, students would be familiar with a format that calls for active participation rather than passive note-taking. Since southern culture is generally disapproving of confrontation and of challenging someone else's expressed opinion, it was even more urgent to allow these gifted students, fresh out of high school, to adapt to the more open-ended nature of college learning. To allow for short teaching units during the second semester, I chose a science reader that had a variety of topics covered in short individual essays. That year the choice was *The Best Science and Nature Writing 2003*, with selections that included essays on, for instance, cloning, pesticides, population control, historical doubts about the Old Testament, and challenges to the blank-slate theory. I intentionally chose readings that would motivate students to argue against the published writers even if they would be hesitant to confront each other. The seminar met once a week; since we had twenty-four students, I chose twelve units and a pair of two students to run the classroom for each unit/week.

The next step was to create a process through which students would understand what they were required to do. They would not simply present, as at a conference. They would not simply lead discussion. They would be in control of the classroom, from defining the start time (the student leaders for that day would decide how to handle interruptions and tardiness) to introducing the topic, providing additional information, calling on students, regulating participation, and ending class for the day. If I, as an instructor, wanted to participate, I would have to raise my hand and wait to be called on (participating by raising the hand was another choice students would make—they could have different formats). I warned students that I would provide no safety net unless classroom happenings transgressed legal boundaries (this, of course, never happened or came close). Since the lack of an instructor-led discussion might make

students think they did not have to do the readings, and since I did not want the leaders to face that problem so early in their teaching experience, I required that all students except the day's leaders had to write a journal response for the day's readings; the journal would be turned in to me at the end of the day.

An important consideration here was assigning the pairs. I considered allowing students to choose their own co-presenters, but in the end the learning potential seemed greater if they had to factor in how to cooperate with someone new in addition to learning how to coordinate the class. Of all my decisions in the trial run, this was the one I pondered the most, and I have since decided to continue with it: students learn a lot from each other not only in terms of different presentation, research, and discussion styles but also in attitudes toward deadlines and assignments. I decided to have students rate the essays/topics that most interested them on the first day of class and then did my best to assign them one of their highest rated topics. No one could look at each other's sheets as they rated the topics to ensure that they would not change their preferences in order to get a particular partner. Not every partnership was successful, but all of the students gained insight into how they deal with personalities different from their own.

After I assigned the pairs, each pair signed up for three conferences with me: two before the day they would run the class and one after. The first conference was, frankly, a chance for me to make sure they had read the essay and to explain how their effort would be graded. The conference took place at least two weeks before they led the class, but some chose to come much earlier. I gave them the following rubric:

- 1) Did they introduce the topic?
- 2) Did they present research beyond the assigned essay?
- 3) Did they keep the class focused on the topic?
- 4) Did they make sure everyone participated?
- 5) Did they avoid having a few students talk too much at the expense of others?
- 6) Did they make sure discussion was grounded in the reading and research?
- 7) Did they offer enough time for their classmates to participate rather than monopolizing the class time themselves?

However, I emphasized that I would grade their performance on a holistic scale beyond the individual elements, and based on whether the class was engaging and focused while also offering learning opportunities for the students. My decision to keep grading at the instructor level was both to emphasize the training element of the seminar and to alleviate any concerns about grades at the division and college level.

At the first session I offered suggestions for getting class discussion moving: for example, if someone is unwilling to contribute, leaders could ask that

student to mention a couple of comments from his or her journal. I also suggested they should have a series of questions for the class and consider everything from how the class would sit (in a circle? in traditional rows? in an amphitheater style?) to what, if any, activities they would include. The week before a pair-led discussion, we had the second meeting. At that point they presented to me a plan of how they would organize the day's class. I let them know that, unless it looked as if they had no plan to speak of, I would not correct, amend, or endorse their plan. Creating their plan was part of the learning process; I simply wanted to assess their preparation. I was not there to approve or disapprove of what they would do in class.

The third and final conference took place after (but not immediately after) the students had led class discussion. Each student leader individually submitted a self-evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the session and of his or her own performance as well as suggestions for what should be changed, maintained, or expanded in the future. I gave more comments during post-class discussions with the first two pairs because they had no basis of comparison with others; later in the semester, I emphasized their strengths but, instead of indicating weaknesses, I pointed out how other pairs had handled similar situations.

### THE ACTUAL CLASS

For all three years I have conducted the seminar in this format, I spend the first three weeks of the spring semester (as I assign pairs and work with the pairs in selecting topics) modeling for students a variety of classroom management styles. At the end of each class I take five or ten minutes to point out the reasons for my actions that day, where I think the class went well, and how it could improve. I reiterate every day that there is no such thing as a perfect class. I emphasize the importance of reflection upon choices both before and after I commit them. I also use these three weeks as points of reference during our conference sessions.

Once students start leading class, I enter the room as early as I can, take attendance, and then choose a seat in the back unless the students have arranged for a particular seating for all of us. I treat the experience as I would an observation of a colleague, although obviously I am on a much higher state of alert than that. Sometimes "facts" are presented that are not only erroneous but can lead to harmful and prejudicial generalizations; sometimes a particular personal example is presented as indicative of a whole class, race, or sex; sometimes the leaders are more interested in talking than listening to others and encouraging participation. I have to make a leap of faith; I have to believe that the long-term goals and benefits will outweigh the particular problems. I also have to accept that, since I do not have more than a couple of turns in which to speak when called on, I have to save my comments for the end. Even then, I have to avoid appearing as the fact checker or police officer of the class and simply state an opinion. I have no illusion that my authority is dissolved during class, but I believe that the less it is used, the softer it is. I therefore try not to get involved in the most heated debates.

## RESULTS

At least nine times out of ten, the class flows effortlessly: more students participate than they do in other classes led by me and other instructors; the leaders find innovative and ingenious ways to engage the class; and both the research and discussion take us places I never would have imagined. I assumed that the biggest benefit would be to the students, but the freshness and constant element of change has significantly rejuvenated me as an instructor and has made the seminar a learning experience for me as well as them. In terms of training students to take a leadership role, even students who are not eager to have an audience find that being paired with another student or just being able to sit down eases them into the process. While during the first couple of sessions there is still an air of apprehension, usually by the third session students forget I am there and focus their attention on the classroom leaders and each other.

The most noticeable result in the spring of 2005 was an increased involvement in the honors student association. Other honors faculty, moreover, started observing that students gradually requested more interaction and assignments that called for greater initiative on their part. In the following year, our students volunteered to present at the Georgia Collegiate Honors Council conference and then the Southern Regional Honors Council conference; they continued their participation in 2007 as well. In 2007 our students submitted proposals to the NCHC conference for the first time; their proposals were not accepted, but they were not discouraged, and they plan to help next year's freshmen submit proposals in addition to submitting new proposals of their own. In fact, our honors students now regularly coach other students on how to present at conferences.

Even further, honors program students have taken the initiative in programs and clubs outside our own, and in the last three years we have had a student body president, a Jack Kent Cooke foundation scholar, and full scholarships to our students who were accepted at Mercer University in Georgia, Georgia Tech, Northwestern in Chicago, and Stanford. Before, our cohort of students transferred to UGA alone, or to smaller regional universities. Their essays and my letters of recommendation demonstrate that the challenge, complexity, and instructional benefits of the leadership experience in their honors seminar offer students an added learning dimension that the environment of a small college would not easily provide.

## MODIFICATIONS

After the first run, a major modification has been to turn part of the fall semester seminar into a vehicle for critique and analysis of classroom instruction through journals and small-group, post-session evaluations. These evaluations take place four times after midterm, when the class has found its pace and students have gotten used to the seminar format. The discussions after these sessions focus on the following areas, similar to the rubric for student leaders:

## LEARNING BY LEADING AND LEADING BY TEACHING

- 1) Did the instructor introduce the topic?
- 2) Did the instructor present any research beyond the assigned text?
- 3) Did the instructor keep the class focused on the topic?
- 4) Did the instructor make sure everyone participated?
- 5) Did the instructor avoid having a few students talk too much at the expense of others?
- 6) Did the instructor make sure discussion was grounded in the readings and research?
- 7) Did the instructor offer enough time for students to participate rather than monopolizing the class time?

The journals invite students to write a narrative impression of what worked well and what did not, taking into consideration the above questions but also allowing for other feedback and concerns. I tell students that these critiques are designed as preparation for leading the class and not as traditional end-of-the-semester course evaluations.

As a result of student feedback, some curricular changes have included adding honors sections of Speech and of Computer Applications in order to help students with their presentation skills and public speaking in the fall semester prior to the leadership seminar in the spring.

## ONGOING CONSIDERATIONS

A major pedagogical consideration is the integrity of the seminar's content: does the selection of essays guarantee that the level, breadth, and depth of intellectual discussion will be similar to those in a seminar led by an instructor? For me this concern brings forth a different set of questions: Does being most qualified to teach a subject mean you are a good teacher? Even if I were running the class, is an English professor qualified to teach an interdisciplinary seminar? From whom and through what processes do students ultimately learn in a seminar? Are our assumptions about what students cannot do predicated on our assumptions about our own abilities? I have no definitive answers to these questions; I have, however, accepted that there is a certain trade-off of content for engagement and leadership opportunities, and it is a trade-off that I and the college have accepted.

An administrative consideration relates to student evaluations of the instructor at the end of the semester. Other than the first three weeks when I model the process for students, my actual presence in the classroom is not center-stage but on the sidelines even though I am ready to intervene if absolutely necessary. Students (and sometimes administrators) can overlook the work that goes into preparing each pair for classroom leadership and assessing their performance after the class. Untraditional pedagogy can lead to untraditional course evaluations.

LUKE VASSILIOU

## CONCLUSION

A final—and initially unforeseen—consequence has been that teaching and classroom management have been problematized among honors program students. Consequently, student reviews of faculty in casual conversations as well as formal evaluations do not stay at the superficial level of whether the instructors are fair or willing to listen to student opinion or even whether they deliver an interesting class. Once students have seen a variety of management styles and have been in the driver’s seat themselves, they see each class as a work in progress and are aware of possibilities and choices rather than just the finished product. This heightened sophistication about pedagogy creates more scrutiny of honors faculty, and this scrutiny then expands beyond the honors program into the college as a whole. While such scrutiny is not always comfortable, it benefits the students, the honors program, and the whole campus, making us better teachers and learners; it thus affirms the transformative role of honors in institutional culture.

## REFERENCES

- Godow, Rew A., Jr. “Honors Program Leadership: The Right Stuff” *Forum for Honors* 16.3 (1986): 3–9.
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## APPENDIX

### SAMPLE STUDENT OPINIONS, CHOSEN TO REPRESENT A VARIETY OF RESPONSES

"I am not a science major, but this class was my favorite. It was exciting coming to class every week. I was nervous when I would present because I am not good with speeches, but being able to sit on the desk made all the difference. Now I know why you professors aren't nervous."

"Dr. Vassiliou, this summer I applied for an internship with Lowe's . . . for my job I would visit some cities in the Charleston area and they asked if I have any experience leading groups etc. When I told them what we did in the seminar they were very impressed. The hiring manager said I have a very good chance . . . I got the job this week. Thanks for giving me something more in the class!"

"I loved how much input we have on everything. I feel like this was truly different from high school where we had no say on anything. The only thing I would suggest is if maybe we can also come up with the essays and topics in the future, and that way it will really be our own class."

"Our group talked with the 'Silent Spring' group since we had similar issues in the essays and we didn't want to do the same. We didn't know if this was allowed. We were so glad when you told us at the first meeting there are no rules. Then we stressed out cause what if some other group did some extravagant stuff and ours was boring by comparison? Overall I found the experience very good, but maybe it would be better for sophomores because this year we were still figuring out college and preparing for our discussion day was so much work for a 1-hour seminar."

"Dr. V, I don't know if I would keep the same essays again. Maybe next time do the class with some focus other than science and nature. Some things were difficult for us to discuss because of people's religious beliefs. But I loved the way we were in charge of the class. I know I was edgy at the conference. I had never done it and I wanted more help from you, but I am glad you trusted us to do a good job."

"I didn't always like the way people handled class, and that's the only suggestion I have to improve the course, don't let people do whatever they want. Have some guidelines. It was hard participating every week because it was like I was walking into a different class every Wednesday."