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## A Penny's Worth of Reflections on Honors Education

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# Presidential Address



# A Penny's Worth of Reflections on Honors Education

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*(What follows is a slightly revised version of the presidential address that John Zubizarreta delivered on Saturday, October 23, 2010, at the annual NCHC conference in Kansas City, Missouri.)*

Giving the presidential address is a daunting task. For several weeks already, I've been receiving emails and phone calls from some of you, asking how my speech was coming along. "Oh, fine, just fine," I fibbed, as I juggled the innumerable responsibilities back home that I know all of us share in our demanding roles as teachers, learners, and leaders. In past years, the address was a formidable one-hour-or-more event over sit-down dinners or luncheons. But times change. As the conference has grown steadily, year after year, and hours—no, even just minutes—have become precious, the address has had to shrink in length, but happily it has not diminished in significance. I remember how Kate Bruce used a multi-media slide show to make her presentation interactive and engaging in a brief time slot, and Hallie Savage provided insight into the recent history of the NCHC as a balance between stability and change. Last year, Lydia Lyons did a stand-up job of delivering an inspirational and pithy message to an attentive audience in a short session. Now, it's my turn.

Those of you who know me well know that I'm not much on lecturing or giving speeches, so get ready in a moment to join me in some interactive work. After all, honors has always placed great emphasis on active learning—in all its guises—as a pedagogical strategy that engages both teachers and students in the kind of significant educational experience shown to transform learning and lives, shown to bring out the best of ourselves as scholars, citizens, human beings.

Educating in order to bring out the best is what honors is all about. The very word *education*, in fact, derives from the Latin root *educare*—originally meaning "to lead forth" or "bring out from"—which suggests education is not a forcing in of knowledge or any systematic accumulation of facts but rather a bringing forth of what is already present in the learner, a nurturing of potential. It is the act of Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the master magician/teacher whose role is to lead the other characters into their best selves, to bring out the best in their natures, whether they align with the lofty, creative spirit of Ariel or

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the rude figure of Caliban. When he is done, when he has finished sharing the authority (and even some of the power) of his students' learning, he relinquishes his "rough magic"—the rough magic, we might say, of authentic honors teaching and learning—and the order of the island, his classroom, is reaffirmed. The shipwrecked characters know who and what they are: *educare* at work, honors at its best.

So now let's model some of what we mean by education, especially when we qualify the term by saying *honors* education, which, as any honors program or college mission statement will tell you, has to do with challenge, risk, creativity, collaboration, reflection, inquiry, community—educational qualities that come not from a simple heap of knowledge but from the "rough magic" of shared learning and bringing forth what is already living in us as potential.

**Pennies Exercise** (developed by Nickerson and Adams): Individually identify the correct penny among the choices shown below, and circle it. Only one penny in the series of images is the correct choice. Once you have selected your personal choice, form small groups and collaborate with your partners to compare answers, discuss variances, explain the reasons for your individual answers, listen to what other have chosen and why, and then negotiate a consensus opinion.



The exercise is fun (and don't forget that learning should be joyful), but it would not be worth much as education if we did not critically reflect on how and why we learn not just about pennies (that is, content or knowledge or facts) but about ourselves as learners, as reflective practitioners, as honors people. What did we learn?

**Small Group Reflections and Discussion:** Engage your small group in a reflective conversation about how and why you learned during the course of the pennies exercise. What did you discover about yourself as a learner, about constructive knowledge, about collaborative inquiry, about the process of learning itself?

You can see that this "presidential address" has broken with tradition in ways beyond what Kate Bruce, Hallie Savage, or Lydia Lyons have done in the

past several years. My aim was not so much to deliver a lecture or to relay information about the state of the NCHC or its future. Actually, I think the enormous success of our past conferences and this one in Kansas City is sufficient evidence of the vitality and relevance of our organization. The fact that in the last few years we have had over forty instances of participants or inquiries from the Netherlands, S. Korea, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Japan, Germany, and other international sources is a heartening sign of the growing interest in honors education outside the U.S. Our work is important. We should be proud.

The real purpose of my so-called address was to engage you in a way that would model our exciting and worthwhile enterprise in honors. We handle pennies countless times all our lives, and we feel confident in our “knowing,” but the exercise demonstrates that what we think we know and what we’ve actually learned in deep and lasting ways may not match up. Shared reflections, collaborative work, and active discussion can foster discoveries that may not have occurred to us in isolation, a lesson that is fundamental in the honors enterprise. I hope you have learned something about pennies, to be sure, but more importantly, something about *how* we learn in an interactive honors environment, something about *ourselves* as honors educators, students, and leaders, and something practical—a new idea, a new strategy, a new resource, a new friendship—that we can take home to our classrooms to help enrich honors teaching and learning on our campuses. New ideas are part of the benefits of our national conferences and other opportunities in NCHC, and they are part of what we mean by *educare* in honors, a challenging but fulfilling rough magic, indeed.

## REFERENCE

Nickerson, R.S., and Adams, J.J. (1979). Long-term memory for a common object. *Cognitive Psychology*, 11, 287–307.

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