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Death—Planning for the Inevitable: A Hybrid Honors Course

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One of the National Collegiate Honors Council's Basic Characteristics of an Honors Program is that "the program serves as a laboratory within which faculty feel welcome to experiment with new subjects, approaches, and pedagogies. When proven successful, such efforts in curriculum and pedagogical development can serve as prototypes for initiatives that can become institutionalized across the campus." Four faculty members from the departments of nursing and respiratory therapy at Midwestern State University, a public liberal arts university in Wichita Falls, designed and taught a hybrid honors course called Death—Planning for the Inevitable. This course, which combined traditional in-class and online instruction, might pave the way for determining how honors education can evolve to accommodate the needs of not just honors students but the wider campus context and beyond.

Death—Planning for the Inevitable (from here on called simply Death) was a three-credit-hour, semester-long course that met for two hours each week in a traditional classroom setting, with the other hour spent on an online component using Blackboard, the university's program for distance education. The MSU College of Health Sciences and Human Services has an extensive program of online coursework and confers degrees on a number of students who rarely, if ever, set foot on campus. Each of the instructors has experience in teaching online courses, and one of the four instructors had previous experience teaching honors classes. This combination of experiences made it reasonable to investigate the direction of online honors instruction. The following study presents background on the merits of online education in honors, including hybrid courses, followed by an exploration of the perceptions of honors students and faculty who participated in the honors hybrid course. We believe this method of teaching successfully enhanced the honors experience and that the hybrid method may be useful in other honors programs as well.

THE GROWTH OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Traditionally, one assumes that learning is to take place in a classroom or other face-to-face environment where the instructor and students are physically together. However, not all students learn the same way; therefore, the traditional approach is not ideal for all students (Young). The use of the Internet and network technologies to provide a means of communication to learners, regardless of their location, challenges the view that learning requires a face-to-face environment (Stacey, Smith, & Barty). Advances in technology expand the range of educational possibilities and contribute to an increased interest in online education; this results in a growing number of courses being supplemented or completely delivered through distance education (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer). Allen, Seaman, and Garrett reported in a major 2004 study of more than 2,500 colleges and universities in the United States, that 55% of public higher education institutions offered at least one online or hybrid course. That percentage is likely to have increased dramatically over the past seven years and will continue to rise as technology advances. Honors programs and colleges should explore these methods of teaching in order to remain relevant in a connected world.

One factor that contributes to the widespread growth of online education is the potential to facilitate learning. Online learning may enable constructivist learning strategies such as self-directed, collaborative, and active learning. Gonzales and Sujo de Montes concluded that key themes of online learning include collaboration, student-centered learning, exploration, shared knowledge, community, and authenticity. These types of learning strategies may occur by allowing students increased time and flexibility for student-to-student interaction, as well as student-to-teacher interaction, by expanding the range of resources available. Students also have increased responsibility for their own learning, and an online component allows for the production of an individualized environment to suit students' different needs and learning styles (Ayala; Garrison; Jonassen et al.; Knowles).

THE HYBRID APPROACH TO LEARNING

A hybrid course, also identified as web-enhanced/assisted or blended, refers to “courses that combine face-to-face classroom instruction with online learning and reduced classroom contact hours” (Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal). Hybrid courses are not traditional courses in which technology components are merely added (Garrison & Kanuka; Garrison & Vaughan; Picciano); they pose the pedagogical question of which learning modality proves to be useful in realizing student outcomes of a course (Brunner). Whether through lectures, online discussions, research papers, simulations, mentoring, collaborative learning projects, field experiences, exams, or other methods, hybrid learning encourages the exploration of multiple learning modalities. Honors programs often promote the exploration of new and innovative methods of learning, so

venturing into the realm of possibilities provided by hybrid learning could potentially open many doors.

The goal of hybrid learning is to improve the educational experience for students by combining the best features of in-class teaching with the best features of online learning to promote active independent learning and reduce class seat time (Young). Hybrid learning reaches beyond the potential of each individual approach (face-to-face/online) to create a new environment and transform both the structure and method of teaching and learning (Ayala). According to a 2009 meta-analysis by the U. S. Department of Education, students who take part in online instruction perform better, on average, than those in a traditional course. Furthermore, those participating in hybrid courses appear to perform better regardless of the course level or discipline (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett; US DOE). A hybrid environment thus can potentially allow honors students to thrive in new ways.

INCREASED STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND INTERACTION

When implemented in pedagogically effective ways, hybrid courses can produce overall improvement in student learning. R. J. Beck recounted his experience of teaching a hybrid course in international law and found that instructor ratings and overall student exam scores exceeded scores in his traditional face-to-face course. Beck had twenty years of previous experience teaching face-to-face law courses and compared his experiences to his first year of teaching a hybrid course. Perhaps one of his most significant findings was that participation and discussion of the course broadened as the typically “quiet” students actively participated in discussions on the online discussion board. A large study by McFarlin concluded that a hybrid lecture/online format increased student grades in an undergraduate exercise physiology course at a large urban university. McFarlin used a total of 658 final grades (traditional = 346, hybrid = 312) to evaluate the effectiveness of the course format. Final grades were 9.9% higher in the hybrid course format, which translated to a letter grade increase on a standard grading scale. In a study by Riffell and Sibley, students in a hybrid undergraduate biology course reported that the quality of communication with the instructor was high and that they read the text more often and studied in groups more frequently. Performance on a post-course assessment test indicated that the hybrid course format was better than or equivalent to the traditional course. Specifically, online assignments were equivalent to or better than passive lectures, and active-learning exercises were more effective when coupled with online activities.

INCREASED STUDENT SATISFACTION AND FLEXIBILITY

An almost universal reason that students report high levels of satisfaction in online courses is time flexibility and convenience (Rovai). Similarly, students value the time and space flexibility offered through hybrid learning. Face-to-face discussions are spontaneous; they can create enthusiasm, build relationships, and foster a sense of community in the classroom (Garrison & Vaughan) while Internet-based discussion forums can offer scheduling flexibility, promote interaction, and foster a sense of community outside of the classroom. These combined benefits may increase student satisfaction. In a 2010 study by Ertmer, students expressed a higher level of confidence when contributing ideas to online discussions, with nearly two thirds of students agreeing that online discussion made it easier to express their opinions and participate in class. A 2011 study by Forte and Root compared the differences and similarities in student satisfaction and learning outcomes between a hybrid and face-to-face web-enhanced macro-course called Human Behavior in the Social Environment. In contrasting surveys that evaluated pretest/post-test content knowledge as well as interactive assignments, final grades, and satisfaction, the researchers found that hybrid and web-enhanced course delivery methods did not differently affect student learning. However, students in the hybrid group indicated perceptions of satisfaction with the learning experience significantly higher than those in the web-enhanced course. Students also reported that they enjoyed the flexibility of the hybrid course.

CONNECTION TO HONORS

Occasional comments during sessions at recent meetings of the NCHC seem to indicate some disregard for the effectiveness of online honors education. However, numerous honors programs at both universities and community colleges experiment with online possibilities. Melissa L. Johnson at the University of Florida hosted a session at the 2011 NCHC meeting in Phoenix titled “Including Online Learning in the Conversation about Teaching and Learning in Honors.” Johnson has used an online component in several courses, and she recently collaborated on an article about student blogging in an honors course (Johnson, Plattner, & Hundley). At the NCHC session, she shared her experience with honors and online education, describing how the “blended learning” environment of a hybrid course allows more class time for hands-on projects. Johnson emphasized that blended learning enhances the honors environment because students do research, exams, and written work on their own time through the online component. The hybrid system allows more classroom time for field trips, hands-on experiments/projects, and discussion. Johnson also quoted the NCHC website, which states that “Honors education is a general term that covers a wide variety of courses, *teaching styles*, and even educational objectives.” She continued by quoting the statement “Honors

programs and Honors courses may attempt to fulfill diverse goals, *utilize different teaching approaches*, and employ a variety of ways of mastering subject matter” (Johnson). Hybrid learning accords with these statements, and Johnson’s success with a hybrid course, along with the success we experienced, seems to show that adding online components to honors courses may be an exciting new territory to explore.

Topics related to online honors courses and honors distance learning come up occasionally via the Hermes Honors Listserv, and each new conversation strand offers varying opinions (Hermes Archive). While some universities report success with online honors courses, the argument that online learning cannot provide the same atmosphere and/or results as face-to-face instruction is ever present. We hope that this essay will provide some additional background for the discussion. The following course experience offers a case worth examining.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

BASIC CONTENT AND DELIVERY

Death was a three-hour hybrid honors course with a two-hour classroom session and a one-hour Blackboard activity each week. The course was an exploration of the fears associated with death and dying; cultural, religious, legal and ethical issues surrounding death; grief and condolence; and practical preparations for the end of life. Learning strategies included readings, class participation, team projects and presentations, written assignments, field trips, observational experiences, online activities, discussions, and evaluations. Students read Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie*, and the instructors placed numerous books on reserve in the library, also posting references and web links on Blackboard each week (see Appendices). Students completed Blackboard discussion topics and activities each week outside of class. These assignments accounted for the additional one hour “hybrid” component of the course. The hybrid model allowed the course to flourish as an honors experience. Because students completed many of the reading and writing assignments as part of the online portion, class time could be used for field trips, class discussions, student presentations, and other unique learning opportunities that are hard to pursue in traditional classroom environments.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDENTS

Honors students voluntarily enrolled in *Death—Planning for the Inevitable*. Most of the students took the course not because of any particular interest in the subject but because they needed an upper-level honors course. Of the 16 students enrolled in the course, 12 were female and 4 were male; their ages ranged from 19 to 26 with a mean of 21.3; 10 were United States citizens, 5 were non-resident aliens, and 1 was unspecified; 3 were freshmen, 4 sophomores, 1 junior, 7 seniors, and 1 seeking a second bachelor’s degree; 6 were nursing majors, 3 were psychology majors, 1 each majored in radiology,

business, chemistry, music, criminal justice and accounting, and 1 was undeclared. As is the case with most honors courses, the honors students themselves partly helped mold this course into a suitable honors experience: the diverse backgrounds of the students enrolled allowed discussions and student presentations to be approached from many different perspectives.

DESCRIPTION OF FACULTY

Our honors program seeks to demonstrate the effectiveness of team-taught, interdisciplinary learning to our university community, and this course provided such an opportunity. The instructional team consisted of four faculty members from the College of Health Sciences and Human Services. They included a nurse with experience in implementation of the national programs Education of Physicians in End-of-Life Care and End-of-Life Nursing Education, a clinical nurse generalist and certified health education specialist, a respiratory therapist with experience in pediatric intensive care, and a nurse with added credentials as a psychologist. All four faculty members had experience teaching online courses, and one had experience teaching honors courses. The idea of teaching a course on death and dying was a common interest among the four faculty members, each of whom had diverse experiences and expertise on the topic of death and dying. They decided that bringing this diversity into the classroom would enrich the course, and they also recognized that the subject matter could be disturbing for some students. Having four faculty members allowed for time to monitor students closely and to follow through if they needed to speak privately about the topics discussed in the course.

WHY HYBRID?

The university's honors program administers the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to incoming students. This instrument measures personality preference on four dichotomous scales of introversion vs. extroversion, sensing vs. intuition, thinking vs. feeling, and judging vs. perceiving. Slightly more than half of the students (53%) indicated a tendency toward introversion rather than extroversion, thus preferring to have thought things through before expressing an opinion or idea; such students are less likely to speak up in classroom discussion. One way that our honors students differ from the general American population is in the sensing/intuition dichotomy; almost two-thirds (63%) of our incoming students leaned toward intuition whereas, according to the *MBTI Manual*, one would expect 63% of a population to be sensing rather than intuitive. The intuitive student tends to take in information by considering relationships rather than hard data, and, again, such a student is more likely to generate a response after having had "time to think about it." These data provide one rationale for offering a hybrid course in honors: it allows these students the opportunity to express themselves at their leisure rather than remaining silent, as they might do during an in-class discussion.

EVALUATION OF THE HYBRID EXPERIENCE

STUDENT PERCEPTION

The sixteen students enrolled in this hybrid honors course completed an open-ended survey in class with an array of questions pertaining to student satisfaction with the course. We obtained additional data from the class's online discussion forums, where students anonymously provided feedback to the instructors regarding the online/hybrid portion of the course. When asked how they felt about the hybrid format, most students were pleased with the structure. Several students commented that the hour online helped them with "time management," and others felt that the online discussion helped them to "say things they couldn't or wouldn't say in class." One student commented on how "interesting" it was to "read classmates' opinions on what they were learning." Another common response indicated a positive feeling of being able to "express thoughts without being shy" or "to express oneself through the discussions [online] after receiving knowledge from class and having time to think about it." One student criticized the hybrid format, stating that the online portion "just added confusion," further remarking that he/she "would rather have done everything on paper and turned it in by hand." These comments indicate that the hybrid format might be a way to level the class participation playing field for students with differing personality types. Overall, the end-of-course evaluations were positive, with students stating they would recommend the course to others.

FACULTY PERCEPTION

The four faculty members also evaluated the course. When asked how they felt about the hybrid format, they were pleased with the structure. One faculty member commented, "Students were better prepared for class since they had done online work and completed online assignments prior to class." Another teacher felt that "online assignments allowed students to delve deeply into topics of interest, and discussions provided some anonymity allowing students to be more expressive than in a face-to-face class." Another concluded that students seemed to benefit from "shorter class periods, as it prevented boredom." In order to improve the structure of the course, faculty made a change mid-stream to emphasize quality rather than quantity on the Blackboard discussion board posts. At first the instructors required the students to post five hundred words each week to partially account for the one-hour hybrid portion of the course. The faculty found that this constraint prohibited students from posting quality discussions. In general, the faculty members considered the course a great success and are anxious to offer it again as a hybrid honors course.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Overall, this hybrid course seemed to be successful at creating an environment that allowed both students and faculty to explore and experiment. The combination of classroom instruction with online discussions and assignments allowed more flexibility within the course. Bridging the gap between classroom instruction and online education has often been a controversial topic in honors programs, and the idea of combining the two methods into a hybrid course was certainly an experiment at MSU, but a teaching approach that holds the promise of faculty satisfaction, increased student satisfaction, increased “think time,” and increased flexibility deserves serious consideration. Perhaps this exploratory study can provide a stimulus for faculty who teach honors courses as they deliberate about teaching methods, pedagogical strategies, and different student orientations to web-based innovations.

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APPENDIX A

RECOMMENDED READING FOR THE COURSE

- Albom, M. (1997). *Tuesdays with Morrie*. New York: Doubleday.
- Baines, B.K. (2006). *Ethical wills: Putting your values on paper*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
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APPENDIX B

RECOMMENDED WEB LINKS FOR THE COURSE

Self-Assessment of Your Beliefs about Death and Dying

<<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/onourown/terms/articles/quiz.html>>

Life Expectancy Calculator

<<http://www.livingto100.com>>

Caring Conversations

<<http://www.practicalbioethics.org/FileUploads/FINAL.Caring%20Conversations%20Workbook%202010.pdf>>

Texas Advance Directive

<<http://www.caringinfo.org/userfiles/File/Texas.pdf>>

Ethical Wills—Preserving Your Legacy of Values

<<http://www.ethicalwill.com/index.html>>

Writing a Condolence Letter

<<http://dying.about.com/od/thegrievingprocess/a/condolence.htm?once=true&>>

Words to Comfort Someone Grieving

<http://dying.lovetoknow.com/Words_to_Comfort_Someone_Grieving>

Organ Donation

<<http://organdonor.gov>>

Twelve Principles of a Good Death

<http://dying.about.com/od/deathdying_and_culture/qt/gooddeath.htm>

Five Tasks of Dying

<http://dying.about.com/od/the_dying_process/a/5_taskd_dying.htm>

Five Reasons to Plan Your Own Funeral

<<http://dying.about.com/od/funeralsandmemorials/a/5reasons2plan.htm?p=1>>

Obituary Guide

<<http://obituaryguide.com/writingtips.php>>

How to Write a Eulogy or Remembrance Speech

<http://dying.about.com/od/funeralsandmemorials/ht/write_a_eulogy.htm?p=1>

Ways to Memorialize the Death of a Loved One

<http://www.ehow.com/way_5619852_ways-memorialize-death-loved-one.html>