

Spring 2005

Originality Is a Risk

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Guzy, Annmarie, "Originality Is a Risk" (2005). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 163.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/163>

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Originality Is a Risk

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I am a teacher of composition and technical communication by vocation, but one avocation of mine is horror, and I occasionally teach a class on horror literature and film. If one is taking films to task for endless, derivative sequels and remakes, as Joan does, then horror is certainly no exception. Many people view the genre with another kind of distaste, decrying its graphic representations of violence and sexuality. Horror is messy and dangerous, and it sends the message that risky behavior is punished with death or worse.

In short, horror isn't *nice*.

I first taught my Horror class as an honors seminar, with enrollment limited to 15 honors students. The final assignment was a seminar paper relating horror themes to topics in their majors. The students produced some interesting projects, with pre-medical students gravitating toward *Frankenstein* and mad scientists, computer science majors exploring artificial intelligence gone wrong, and so forth.

I taught the class again as a special topics course with open enrollment and a cap of 40, and honors students could contract for honors credit. Once again, the honors students wrote well-organized, well-developed final papers, but compared to papers created by the non-honors students, these papers were, for the most part, dry academic prose.

In composition parlance, they were *nice* papers.

The non-honors students took more risks, not only with the topics upon which they wrote but also the ways in which they broke from the organization and format of traditional academic papers, such as introducing subsections with poems, incorporating hand-drawn illumination within the text, or simply changing font styles. A psychology major wrote the paper as a series of journal entries by a therapist assigned to diagnose and treat Freddy Krueger, the razor-gloved antagonist from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films. The student placed a Post-It note on the final page, noting that the journal had been found by police twenty-four hours after the last entry had been made, the doctor having been slashed to death.

On the whole, honors students did not contribute to class discussion as frequently as the non-honors students. Perhaps it was because the non-honors group included more people who could be classified as punks or goths, and they might have felt a closer connection to the material (conformity of appearance within their own subcultures is an irony to be addressed elsewhere). Their iconoclasm, however, went far deeper than their fashion sense; they asked different kinds of questions and weren't afraid to challenge contemporary perceptions of sexuality, religion, and other taboo subjects.

In contrast to the images projected by the punks and goths, much of the sense of self-worth for honors students comes from successfully navigating through and being rewarded by the educational apparatus. In an era of endless testing and cookie-cutter curricula, honors students learn to value the GPA, the SAT or ACT score, even the dreaded five-paragraph

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essay. High school seniors who reach the personal interview phase of honors program admission tend to speak politely and dress appropriately. Only one of my interviewees has broken “uniform,” wearing a black t-shirt and jeans, and no one has worn studded black leather or layers of black eyeliner. It wouldn’t be respectful.

It wouldn’t be *nice*.

But what happens when we take away that safety net of academic conformity? Are honors students willing to take the risks associated with originality?

One honors student in the Horror class was an art major who had multiple piercings and worked at a local tattoo parlor. Other honors students rarely spoke to her, and she engaged in more conversation with non-honors students, several of whom she knew from off-campus circles. She asked questions that probed the material in unusual ways, and she was willing to question authority, including my own, which in turn stimulated me and blazed new trails for class discussion. In her final paper, she related ritual scarification in contemporary body-art, such as tattoos and body piercings, to body-based horror, like the sadomasochistic *Hellraiser* films.

In general, however, honors students tended to be less certain when faced with this break from the traditional academic assignment, asking if a topic was *really* okay to write about and seeking my reassurance and approval. One recurring question for me has been whether students who elect to participate in an honors program are necessarily the brightest but rather those who have mastered the academic game: show up everyday, do your homework, give the teacher what she wants.

Be *nice*.

More non-honors Horror students seized the opportunity to create something original, seemingly saying, “This frees me from a format with which I have had limited success.” Honors students, however, sometimes grow uncomfortable when we alter or remove the formulae which they have mastered, worrying, “I don’t know how to earn an A for this.” Students may consider risk-taking a threat to GPA and scholarship money, but I believe that the discomfort runs deeper: non-conformity is a risk to their self-esteem and self-image. Who am I if not the person who writes the best paper or earns the highest score in the class?

As teachers, if we address a growing lack of originality in honors students’ work, then perhaps we also need to address the assignments themselves. You may protest, however, that we must teach students to meet certain disciplinary standards, and we must adhere to such standards ourselves for professional development. I would counter that this positions us in exactly the same risky place we want to put our students regarding originality: our professional image is at stake, just as theirs is.

In the end, if we don’t want rote regurgitation or plagiarism, and if we want students to break from their conformity, then as teachers, as Frank Aydelotte might say, we need to break the academic lockstep. If a component of an honors student’s academic success truly is learning how to give teachers what we want, then the onus is on us to change what we want and then actively promote and support original thought in our honors students’ work.

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