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Ethnogenesis: The Construction and Dynamics of the Honors Classroom Culture

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INTRODUCTION

In 2008 the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* published a series of essays which editor Ada Long described as a "rich and varied conversation about the culture of honors" (10). The contributors, mostly honors administrators, included Charlie Slavin, Dean of the University of Maine Honors College, whose lead article provided "one cornerstone . . . that is common to the culture of honors: taking intellectual risks" (15). George Mariz echoed Slavin in his claim that honors "is, above all, a culture of intellectual effort" (24). He posits that, "while [it] is catholic and inclusive, it is also discriminating and critical" (24). Jim Ford writes that another cornerstone of honors culture includes students with "a passion for knowledge and for wisdom" (28) while Paul Strong stresses the importance of shared identities, camaraderie, and a healthy dose of humor complementing the serious nature of the honors endeavor.

How this culture is actually created in the classroom was the starting point of research undertaken at the behest of our dean by a group of students and faculty in the honors college at the University of Maine. While the administrators of honors programs have a sense of what they think characterizes an honors culture, our questions were how faculty and students understand and implement this culture in a classroom; how honors models and pedagogies play out; and what factors exert more influence than others in achieving the honors culture to which we aspire. In a program such as ours, with faculty coming from a number of disciplinary homes and schools of thought, we wanted to know how the culture of honors is cultivated in practice. As Charlie Slavin is fond of saying, "some people get honors and some don't."

Our study is a preliminary one only, a point to keep in mind throughout the discussion. A much larger research project would be necessary to draw broad conclusions, but this study sheds some light on the nature of honors

culture from the perspective of faculty and students and, as such, is a worthwhile contribution to that "rich and varied conversation" described by Long. Our research focused on the first course that incoming students take in honors (HON 111) and included observations of only the first five weeks in two of the sixteen sections of the course offered in the fall 2009 semester. Using non-participant observation in the classrooms and surveys of students and faculty, we sought to understand how a random group of individuals brought together in a section of HON 111 emerges as a class with a shared identity and purpose.

Classroom culture is informed by several interest groups: in this case, the honors college itself in terms of course structure and curricula; the faculty; and the students. All three stakeholders bring an understanding and set of experiences that shape their notion of what it means to be a participant in education, albeit from different roles and perspectives. The college's objectives are defined in its statement of purpose while those of the faculty are formally articulated orally and/or in their written course outlines. Occasionally students participate in this process; more typically, they are the passive recipients of an imposed structure and curriculum. Our research was aimed at discerning how these constituencies contributed to the creation of classroom culture within the context of the University of Maine Honors College.

The concept of ethnogenesis—" a way of looking at culture as a historical and complex process of cultural and group formation" (Skoggard)—was the organizing theoretical framework for the reseaarch as it describes the process whereby groups deliberately create or are defined by a common identity. Although etymologically rooted in identities forged from ethnic or national relationships, ethnogenesis is a term relevant to a study of honors culture, where stakeholders work to create a shared culture and identity in relation to the surrounding physical, intellectual, and interpersonal environments. Ethnogenesis was a pivotal concept in our research and analysis because it acknowledges the often fluid and temporal nature of the emergent culture.

BACKGROUND

All University of Maine Honors College students, regardless of their majors, are enrolled in the four-course sequence Civilizations: Past, Present, and Future during their first two years in the program. The course sequence is a modified "great books" curriculum, organized chronologically, in which the texts—primarily books but also selections of music, art, and architecture—explore the "development of civilizations, cultures, and intellectual achievements through a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives" (Honors College General Information 1).

The courses use a seminar model, encouraging collaborative exploration of material even at the first-year level. Each section of twelve to fifteen students meets for two hours a week in addition to a ninety-minute general lecture on the week's reading. The courses are reading- and writing-intensive, generally covering one text a week, with multiple writing assignments. Specific assignments and their assessment are left to the discretion of the individual instructor, but the Civilizations sequence is a fixed curriculum; the instructors all teach the same texts although they are free to assign supplemental material.

A distinguishing feature of our honors program is the disciplinary diversity of faculty teaching in the Civilizations sequence. Those disciplines include or have included English, history, classics, political science, sociology, folklore, geography, religion, chemistry, music, modern language, economics, math, and law. Students are strongly encouraged to take the four courses in the sequence from different faculty members in order to experience a variety of disciplinary approaches and perspectives.

The first course in the Civilizations sequence begins with what we call an "Honors Read" text, typically a contemporary book dealing with salient social and cultural concerns. All incoming students read this text the summer before beginning at the university and thus enter the program with a common experience and shared point of reference that facilitate community building. The other HON 111 course materials date before the common era and generally include selections from the Torah, *The Odyssey*, Sappho, Plato, *Dao de Jing*, Aristotle, and *The Aeneid*, among others. The incoming students have not yet formed close associations with others in their cohort or created deeply rooted identities as members of the honors college, so they provide researchers an opportunity to observe the dynamics of creating and negotiating an honors culture that a later cohort could not.

A culture arises in any classroom setting regardless of the college or course, so our concern was to discover what makes an honors classroom culture discernibly different and to identify traditions or pedagogies that set honors apart. Slavin and others identified the emphasis of honors on "intellectual effort" and "passion for knowledge and wisdom." Honors at the University of Maine, like most honors colleges and programs, is also distinguished by its commitment to small classes, where the pedagogical model is a collaboration between faculty and students in the exploration of ideas and interpretation of texts. Students are active learners engaged in critical discussions, with faculty acting as facilitators rather than lecturers. The challenge is how to take a group of first-year students—new to university, new to the honors college, unfamiliar with our pedagogies and expectations—and transform them into a cohesive unit with a shared investment in our intellectual endeavor. Many

students must first figure out how to take the personal risks that will then enable them to take intellectual risks.

Other factors contributing to the formation of an honors culture and identity at the University of Maine include dedicated honors housing, social events geared toward building community, annual trips to Washington, D.C. and the NCHC conference. Most of these activities take place later in a student's career, however, and not all honors students live in honors housing; many live in other dorms, some are commuters, and others, particularly upper-class students, live off-campus. Honors classes consist of students from all disciplines, and it is not unusual to have engineering, English, biology, history, and French majors, to name a few, sitting side by side. Also, while the majority of our students come from Maine, we also enroll students from other states and abroad. While these other experiences play a role in supporting an honors culture, not all are shared equally or at all among the students. What they do share is enrollment in HON 111, so we focused our attention on this experience in an attempt to elucidate the factors significant to creating classroom culture.

METHODOLOGY

The research took a three-pronged approach: (1) a survey of faculty, (2) a survey of second-year students who had completed HON 111 the previous fall, and (3) in-class observations of two sections of HON 111 taught by different faculty members.

A one-page survey was distributed to 18 honors faculty currently teaching HON 111 or who had taught the course recently. Participation was voluntary, and the surveys were anonymous. We received 10 responses. Faculty were specifically asked to:

1. state their teaching philosophy;
2. articulate expectations of themselves and of students;
3. describe how their classroom vision is implemented; and
4. discuss how intentional they are in developing classroom norms.

A two-page survey was distributed to second-year students asking a series of questions about their educational background and honors experience in general followed by specific questions about HON 111. For the latter section, students were asked, among other questions, how classroom expectations were communicated, if they came to class prepared, whether the class was primarily discussion-based, who led discussion, how comfortable they were in participating, and if they were encouraged to participate. This survey was anonymous and voluntary, and 58 students, just over 25% of the class, participated.

Finally, two student researchers spent the first five weeks of the fall 2009 semester attending two different sections of HON 111 as non-participant observers to see first-hand how classroom culture was created and negotiated in these specific settings. A study observing more faculty for a longer duration would be ideal, but factors limited us to a more modest undertaking. However, the data sets indicate a remarkable correspondence between faculty aspirations for their classrooms, students' reports of their experiences, and the observations of classroom culture in the making. These results, while only preliminary, are promising.

THE FACULTY SURVEY

The results described below are based on responses from ten of the faculty members. In terms of their teaching philosophies, faculty respondents identified four basic components:

1. Critical thinking: Faculty reported encouraging careful, critical engagement with the material. Expanding perspectives, being open, and pondering the "big" questions were also important.
2. Critical expression: The emphasis was on developing students' skills in the oral and written expression of ideas and interpretations.
3. Confidence: Several noted an emphasis on empowering students by inspiring confidence in their intellectual abilities as being an important component in their teaching.
4. Collaboration: Faculty indicated a concerted effort to confront the inherently hierarchical relationship between faculty and students and to create partnerships by encouraging collaborative exploration and interpretation of the curriculum.

In describing their classroom vision and their expectations of themselves and their students, faculty members were consistent in the use of terms such as *engagement*, *preparation*, and *respect*. All participants (faculty and students alike) were expected to come to class prepared and willing to engage the texts and each others' ideas in a considerate manner. The majority of faculty respondents reported being purposeful in communicating classroom norms and expectations; they used words such as *explaining*, *outlining*, *modeling*, *respecting*, *inquiring*, *encouraging*, and *listening* when describing these expectations. Teachers communicated orally, in writing (through the syllabus and other handouts), and in online postings to class-designated folders throughout the term. Several faculty specifically noted the importance of forming a community in the classroom (one specifically said "an intellectual community") and by extension a culture that fosters respectful, critical

engagement with the material and each other. Gary Bell especially emphasizes the importance of this last factor in his essay "The New Model Education," where he lists as the fifth "premise of excellent pedagogy" that "we must always telegraph respect for our students as individuals regardless of how weak or strong they may be academically" (56).

THE STUDENT SURVEY

This survey was completed by second-year students who had taken HON 111 in the fall of 2008. Approximately one fourth (58 students) of this cohort participated in the survey; thus we must be cautious in the conclusions we draw from this data set. Had a far more representative sample responded, our results might look very different. One could claim the data reflect a bias toward conscientious students since these 58 made the effort to respond, with 49 of them reporting that they went to class prepared most or all of the time. But one could also argue, as Ford (2008) does, that honors students are by nature conscientious. Given the overall positive tenor of their comments, we may also conclude that our sample reflects students who are satisfied with their honors experience. Not surprisingly, then, 54 of the students thought both the assignments and their final grades were fair.

Caveats aside, the reports of what students perceived to be happening in the classroom corresponded to faculty's stated objectives, even using the same language to describe the classroom culture. Students reported that all the faculty members communicated their expectations and that 75% did so both verbally and in handouts. Significantly, 53 students claim those expectations were *clearly* articulated, which speaks to the value placed on communication and understanding. Along these lines, 50 of the students participating in the survey said their classes were primarily discussion-based or a combination of discussion and lecture. Almost all the students reported feeling comfortable speaking in class at least some of the time, and 51 students reported feeling comfortable expressing their own opinion and feeling encouraged to do so by their instructor, their fellow students, the classroom environment, or various combinations of the three. A number of the students also described a classroom culture characterized by intellectual risk-taking—the kind that Slavin identifies in his article on honors culture.

When asked specifically to comment on what encouraged them to express their opinion in the classroom, students used language remarkably similar to that used by the faculty when articulating their goals. They identified the following factors as positively contributing to their participation in the class: a non-judgmental and inviting small-class environment that promoted open flow of ideas, respect, friendliness, comfort, and equal opportunity. The responses suggest the stakeholders were successful in creating

classroom cultures where students could gain confidence in their critical-thinking skills and abilities to articulate ideas in a supportive and collaborative environment.

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

The third component of this project entailed observing two first-year classes engage in the process of developing cultural norms and practices in the classroom. We felt that watching the participants negotiate roles and expectations would add valuable insights to our understanding of the processes themselves while providing the kind of insights that self-reflective surveys would not. In this section, the two student researchers describe the dynamics and cultures of the classes they observed.

Morgan's Classroom (by Morgan Brockington)

This class met Tuesday and Thursday mornings for fifty minutes and was taught by a female instructor. Although the instructor's teaching methods might have been altered by the presence of an observer, she seemed comfortable in her pattern of teaching, which appeared to be her natural way of conducting class. On Tuesdays, the instructor and students discussed the weekly text, picking out themes to investigate and analyze further. On Thursdays, students discussed points raised in the general lecture—what they liked, disliked, or found interesting—that had been posted to the open online class folder. These weekly discussions provided common ground for the students and opportunities for all to offer their viewpoints. The instructor worked to develop an open, intellectual community among the participants, which played a critical role in creating the classroom culture.

The classroom's comfortable feel, which the instructor established at the outset, was gradually reinforced by the students, who engaged each other in amiable conversation about their outside lives at the beginning of class. As students got to know one another, this banter not only supported the relaxed environment of the class but also fostered personal relationships, which grew over time as the students got to know each other better. On the first day of class, the instructor attempted to establish a comfort level by playing a get-to-know-you game. In this activity students answered questions: What about you is like all of us? What about you is like most of us? What about you is like some of us? What about you is unique to you? This activity got students, few of whom knew each other at the outset, to find similarities even among their differences, thus turning a group of individuals into a community with common experiences and interests. This game allowed for the participation of every student and inspired confidence by asking questions that all could

answer, alleviating first-day nerves. The instructor intentionally focused on building a sense of comfort and community from the first day of class.

During my five weeks of observation, the students began to take on certain roles that were still evolving when the observations ended. For example, one female and one male student led the discussions while a few others assumed roles of shy observers. One student took on the role of jokester, and another became an instigator of thought-provoking questions and arguments. As time progressed, students grew comfortable with the roles they had adopted. Similarly, the professor played her own role in the classroom as an unbiased judge, promoting a safe and trusting environment where students could openly express their opinions.

The physical environment of the classroom also influenced the development of a classroom culture. For the first couple of weeks, students always sat in the same seats, but after a few classes they began changing seats, perhaps indicating a growing sense of comfort in the classroom as the students and instructor got to know each other. The researcher sat in different areas of the room each class, and the instructor changed her seat almost every class as well. By contrast, only two students, the ones who typically led class discussions and happened to be from the same hometown, consistently sat in the same seats. These specific seats may have assisted in creating and upholding their established identities in the classroom.

The topic of the weekly text was a primary determinant of the classroom dynamic. When discussing Wolkstein and Kramer's *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth*, mostly female students spoke and the males seemed nervous when they did speak. The sexual tone of the work created a discomfort in the classroom that was apparent when the female student who had taken on the role as the reader and, despite having always volunteered to read in the past, was hesitant to read aloud a passage with explicit sexual references; both sexes participated equally. Clearly, the subject matter of the texts informed the nature of and participation in class discussion, but engagement with the material was also a factor.

Within their established roles in a comfortable environment, students developed a sense of trust and social cohesion. Although students in the class were usually polite, caring and interested in the others, it was typically the instructor who recognized when students had not spoken much during discussion and either called on the quiet students or brought up a topic of particular interest to them. The instructor also created trust through her ability to relate to her students on a personal level, making herself vulnerable and trustworthy through personal anecdotes. She told a story about a horrible college experience of hers: she had chosen her college because of the English program and was completely shocked when she received a B- on her first paper.

When she asked the professor how she could improve, he told her, "We [teachers] joke about what you wrote about." With this story, the instructor comforted the students by indicating that she had been through what they were experiencing, thus suggesting that she was sympathetic to their situation. After hearing this story, students were more comfortable asking about their work and seeking guidance outside the classroom. Students became more trusting of the instructor because they saw her more as a helpful ally than as a critical evaluator.

Over the five weeks of my observation, students became more willing to engage in intellectual discussion and appeared more comfortable doing so. With their different backgrounds and experiences, the students united in their common goal of discussing and finding meaning in the honors texts. Through their discussions and the accessibility of the instructor, a sense of community evolved that allowed students to identify themselves as intellectual individuals capable of questioning and examining the weekly material.

By forming personal relationships, the students were able to create a safe environment where they could take shared ownership in the exploration of philosophical, political, religious, and artistic ideas. This particular culture positively enabled all the honors students to form bonds with their peers, find trust in and guidance from their instructor, rise above their vulnerability, and expand their knowledge through the discussion and absorption of others' opinions of the honors material.

Kristen's Classroom (by Kristen Kuhns)

This class met once a week for two hours in the evening and was taught by a male professor. Having had this instructor twice before during the honors Civilizations sequence, I was familiar with his style of teaching despite noticeable differences in the way he ran this class. Consistent with my own experience, the students were explicitly charged with sharing responsibility for creating the classroom culture. What appeared different was the instructor's intentional effort to further engage students in the discussion either through games, wherein students were challenged to get to know each other, or through group activities that encouraged students to learn to work together.

On the first day of class, students participated in teamwork activities that required them to communicate effectively in order to accomplish a designated goal so that this group of strangers in a very short time became a cultural community. These kinds of activities facilitated the processes of ethnogenesis, where groups purposefully participate in their own identity creation. Since no student appeared to have previously known any other in the classroom, the activities required them not only to learn each other's names but

also to take responsibility as participants. I was particularly interested in seeing if the initial roles assumed by students in these early interactions would be maintained over the five weeks of observation, and they were. The roles students adopted and maintained contributed to a comfortable and cohesive environment in which they could interact, creating not only a classroom community but a sense of shared identity.

Part of establishing an identity within a class involves understanding what roles to play. Over time, students developed identities such as dominant male or female, the quiet one, the entitled one, and the jokester, to name a few. The quiet one seemed to speak only when she had something profound to say, which would leave the other students both surprised and stunned. The entitled one became an outcast because students tired of hearing frequent personal and off-topic contributions. Finally, the jokester acted almost as a buffer for handling difficult topics in a more socially comfortable way by using humor to defuse tension.

The instructor worked to create a trustworthy environment in which students could learn. Students were encouraged to bring snacks and talk with each other at the beginning of class about how they were doing. In order to facilitate in-class discussion, students needed to interact and trust each other enough to be open about how they felt. The instructor made sure students knew that they were allowed to express their beliefs and opinions, stating, "You don't have to inherit my beliefs." He also established trust by making it clear that students could modify and alter his assignments, thus giving students control of their academic environment and engendering trust in the instructor.

The nature of the discourse about texts also influenced the classroom culture. The texts challenged students to evaluate their beliefs and, as a result, to confront their sense of identity. For example, Zimbardo's *The Lucifer Effect* caused social discomfort that students relieved through jokes that created a sense of social cohesion. Students were uncomfortable in a different way when talking about religion and saw the *Torah* as a text that "tells you what to do," so the instructor led that discussion. Later, students found *The Pre-Socratics Reader* intellectually challenging, so the instructor divided the students into smaller groups, presumably a tactic that facilitated engagement with the text in a way the larger group did not.

As in all communities, the creation of culture is linked to the creation of identity. As the students discovered their own roles, they were better able to relate to the texts. When a topic arose that students felt unsure of, such as the *Torah*, the students turned to the professor for guidance. He in turn encouraged students to work together and open their minds to the thoughts of others through group work and open discussions. This push toward collaboration

and tolerance emphasized a culture of cooperation and inclusion despite challenges such as the tension created by the "entitled" student. The reality of all communities and cultures, with the different roles played by the participants, is that even the best practices of shared purpose and cooperation cannot always thwart marginalization; the "entitled" student's role in this case morphed into "the outcast."

CONCLUSION

This research set out to explore the creation of an honors classroom culture at the University of Maine from the perspective of the participants themselves and to see how the pedagogical model was realized in two honors classes. Although the sample size was small and the conclusions thus tentative, we hope to have added to the body of knowledge about honors culture. We knew going in that the culture would be shaped by the interactions of faculty, students, curriculum, and environment, but we did not know how these factors acted synergistically in real situations. Likewise, we had a sense of our faculty's teaching philosophies, but we did not know how effective they were in communicating and bringing to fruition those aspirations in their classrooms. We also did not know how students perceived their HON 111 classroom experience academically, socially, and culturally or the language they used to describe it. In many ways, the student survey was the most valuable component of the exercise, because students strongly indicated that their teachers were successful in realizing their teaching objectives of critical thinking and writing and of fostering confidence in a collaborative academic environment.

The University of Maine Honors College is informed by commitment to academic and intellectual rigor "based on active learning and critical engagement" where students are encouraged "to ask good questions and to find [their] own answers" ("Frequently Asked Questions"). Such a collegiate culture, like honors cultures everywhere, is best achieved by open and trusting relationships of the students with each other and the instructor, discussions and analysis of multifaceted works where student input is valued, and comfort in expressing ideas and opinions with confidence within an intellectually rigorous setting.

NOTE

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