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2015

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Bormans, Ron, "Innovation Labs: A Professional Approach to Honors" (2015). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council -- Online Archive*. 448.

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Innovation Labs: A Professional Approach to Honors

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HONORS DEAN: RON WEERHEIJM

THE VALUE OF HONORS EDUCATION

Honors education at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences (RUAS) focuses on students who are willing to invest more in their study than the average student. Selection criteria are the students' willingness to develop beyond what is offered in the regular curriculum and are not based on previous accomplishments. By using these criteria, we made the honors program broadly—but not freely—accessible. The task we set for all students is “Surpass Yourself!” The additional challenge of the honors program lies in its multidisciplinary teamwork. Students say that the program teaches them to appreciate different perspectives on issues and to integrate these with their own perspectives (Lappia, Weerheijm, Pilot, and Van Eijl). We stimulate honors students to get the best out of themselves and to develop themselves as junior innovative professionals. Our honors students “work with others to

achieve innovative solutions that are of practical value and appropriate to be adopted in socially relevant issues” (Hogeschool Rotterdam).

The desired learning outcomes of the RUAS honors programs are the five competences included in our profile *Learning to Innovate*, which describes an excellent professional as one who can:

1. focus on innovation (innovation-driven);
2. focus on the context in which (s)he works (demand-driven);
3. work closely with important disciplines in this context (cooperatively multidisciplinary);
4. arrive jointly at a solution to an issue, provide arguments in favor of the solution, and share ideas (co-creative in knowledge generation); and
5. manage his or her own development (capable of interactive learning).

These competencies focus on the student’s individual development as an innovative professional and provide emphasis on the student’s intended profession. In this way, RUAS aims to educate resilient professionals who are comfortable and well-prepared. We challenge students to work independently and as members of teams on reliable solutions to extremely complex and multidisciplinary issues drawn from current practices. Our aim is to achieve the highest possible level of student participation by integrating honors programs within eighty different curricula with the idea that all students should have access to at least parts of these programs. At the same time, lecturers have to operate on the notion that quality is characterized by considerable differentiation, sometimes in relation to level or profession and always in relation to specific learning needs of the individual student. The ever-changing world of professional practice will require future innovators who have sharp social insights, flexibility, and new forms of cooperation.

The way we design our honors programs in so-called “Innovation Labs” can best be described by a former student.

AN HONORS STUDENT’S STORY, BY BOO VAN DER VLIST STUDENT IN THE FINE ARTS PROGRAM AT WILLEM DE KOONING ACADEMY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE STUDENT AT UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Challenge

“I heard about the honors program from my lecturer. During my study in fine arts I was looking for challenges, including a second study, political

science. As an artist I was also looking for a link to society. The Innovation Lab, *Co-creation in the Public Domain*, a multidisciplinary honors project, linked to this interest. The aim was to carry out a project in a neighborhood of Rotterdam and in doing so to cooperate in multidisciplinary teams. An artist often works alone, and I wanted to change this. Artists are important when it comes to thinking about society, which is essential for innovation. The five competencies of an innovative professional that we acquired during the honors program added value compared to the regular fine arts curriculum. Not only the topic but also the way of working and cooperating were essential for artists who wish to be at the center of society. Compared to students who do the regular program, my fellow students in the honors program think beyond their own disciplines. They are curious and have a drive to understand how things work.”

Authentic Learning Environment

“I worked in the neighborhood of Kralingen-Crooswijk, an exceptional neighborhood in which rich and poor, young and old, and all sorts of nationalities and backgrounds live in close proximity to each other. Fascinated, I carried out research into this diversity. We set ourselves the task of bringing these people together and understanding what was already happening and why. On one level, there was little interaction between the different groups, but a link existed without being noticed. Everyone wore the same Uggs boots! Everyone from hockey girls to gangster ladies, from DJs to grandmothers, from babies to tough boys—everyone in the neighborhood wore Uggs! We carried out a project based on this odd commonality, and it emerged that everyone had their own story. All the people turned out to be sources of information, inspiration, and creativity, but approaching people and asking the first question was an enormous challenge.”

Issue

“The multidisciplinary issue drawn from actual practice was the absence of contact between social groups within a neighborhood. I chose this issue myself, but the residents of the neighborhood were the problem owners. What struck us was that there was so little interaction between social groups. While this isolation might have been valuable in some way, it was a great challenge. In dealing with the practical problem, I could not draw on theoretical knowledge from my art education, but I could draw on political science, and I was able to make use of my skills as an artist. I cooperated with another fine

arts student, and we held numerous discussions with groups from other disciplines within the Innovation Lab. Our project received positive responses. In my Innovation Lab I learned above all that I would like to cooperate closely with all those involved and to ensure that ideas are brought together in a way that bears fruit.”

Supervision

“The coach who supervised me had considerable knowledge and showed that it was possible to go much farther than I imagined. He motivated me to approach people and test my ideas. In addition, another professor of applied sciences assisted me with different approaches and stimulated me to achieve excellent results. I could make my own contribution to my Innovation Lab, and there was considerable scope for my ideas so that I could focus on my own design. It was a challenge to look for my specific research niche. A real ‘flow moment’ occurred when I went into Rotterdam to try out my ideas. The type of supervision, work, and feel of this project was different from the regular curriculum: it focused on real cooperation and multidisciplinary.”

Reflection

“Writing a portfolio for the final assessment was valuable because it forced me to spend more time on reflection. Honors students must be aware of their weaknesses and strengths, and I acquired a new perspective on myself, in particular through the valuable concept of co-creation. As an artist one has the inclination to be directive, but co-creation stimulated me to ‘let go’ an idea so it could take root with others, and this was an eye-opener for me. The Innovation Lab contributed to my personal development in teaching me that one has simply to take the first step to achieve something and the rest will just happen.”

HONORS EDUCATION: SMART INTERVENTIONS

Within the RUAS we developed honors programs with an initial subsidy from the Ministry in the period from 2009 to 2014. An important part of this development was the focus on “quality,” a topic of discussion that took place throughout the RUAS. Although this discussion has been taking place since 2004, we have only now reaped its fruits so that our insights into the “quality” contribute effectively to the professional and personal development of honors students.

The evaluative research of Lappia, which will be published later this year, shows the acceleration in our development of value in honors. The innovation that had begun in 2004 occurred mainly from the perspective of the organization: efficient programs, parallel programming; simpler exchanges; and agreements on modules and final competence levels. These were good decisions in themselves, but obtaining support for them within the institution proved to be no easy task, and the expected results related to the intended competency levels; student and employer satisfaction were low. In recent years we have focused on quality more from the inner perspective of what teams of lecturers expect from their curricula, their pedagogical competence, and their students. We focus first on what we wish to achieve as a team, and only then do we determine how to organize it. The discussions within the teams of lecturers cause a stir but also result in a greater sense of responsibility and a growing realization of what each team's own "quality" is. In this context, honors education grows and stimulates the discussion.

Lappia's evaluative research resulted in a design matrix in which honors programs can develop optimally. We distinguish between three levels at which learning takes place: the individual, the team, and the community. Community is the level at which cooperation occurs with external experts and employers in local communities in relation to the professional activities and knowledge co-creation within the honors programs. Lecturers arrange the learning processes within honors programs in relation to these three levels.

The process of honors program development takes place roughly within four iterative steps: focusing on the intended final results; detailed design by the lecturers; determination of how the program is perceived by students and external experts and whether implementation reflects intentions; and finally the actual learning outcomes. For the students, the outcome is "being more capable"; for the team it is "knowing more"; and for the local community it is "having more."

The lecturer is the crucial factor in the process. If discrepancies occur in the succession of phases, friction arises in the learning process, and students and lecturers might revert to the old, familiar routines. In 2004, this human factor—the lecturer—probably received too little attention. We learned that lecturers need to take an active part in programs in the interest of faculty development on a continuous basis; it is necessary to discuss, calibrate, and further develop the quality of the honors programs, with appropriate interventions, to effect *Learning to Innovate* as the (intended) learning outcome. We will therefore continue to invest in this area.

This development process relates to Pilot's description of the conditions that have to be present for successful innovation in education. These three conditions are Infrastructure, Authority, and Consensus (IAC). With regard to *Infrastructure*, the issue is whether lecturers have suitable knowledge and skills to implement new educational models effectively. Infrastructure also involves a balance between fixed agreements and flexibility: a balance between fixed values, such as regular curricula or the intended competencies of *Learning to Innovate*, and the freedom that is necessary to make cooperation between experimenting programs possible.

Authority relates to the informal authority of lecturers and managers, not to the directive power of managers to carry out what is intended. Teams need to have the right kind of people to initiate discussion among lecturers and to bring about shared values on the basis of their own authority. Herein lies the power of authority: the mutual bond and adaptability that have a productive effect on the quality of education.

The concept of *Consensus* implies striving to achieve the same objectives together so that everyone is heading in the same direction in how we teach and approach students. This consensus should be twofold: that Innovation Lab is an appropriate form of challenge and that the profile *Learning to Innovate* has added value for innovative professionals. Being a University of Applied Sciences, the consensus in RUAS should exist not only within teams of multidisciplinary lecturers but also among experts and employers. Students, after all, will work within the professional community during and after completion of their education.

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The primary focus of our approach is always providing the best possible education and career preparation for students. Boo's story illustrates how a student views her honors experience and indicates that we are on the right path. We are proud that at least one university in the U.S., the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, was inspired by our program when they were developing theirs. Our aim remains to offer optimal education to our students given the considerable diversity in their backgrounds. The city of Rotterdam, and therefore also our university, is a melting pot, so quality means something different to every student. As a challenging form of education, the honors program makes an optimal contribution to this diversity and offers opportunities for students to develop further. In this way we can say now and in the future, "Surpass Yourself!"

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