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# WHAT'S MISSING IN HONORS EDUCATION: A THEORY-DRIVEN APPROACH

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## ABSTRACT

If honors education is to thrive and mature in the future, better informed and more systematic thinking should be used to design and implement honors programs. The purpose of this paper is to establish a case for theory-driven research and practice as a means to improve honors education. It identifies the goals of honors education and then reasons that honors education should incorporate theory in order to advance the field. Theory is identified as a *set* of inter-related concepts, definitions, and propositions that specify how and why a phenomenon occurs. The most important function of a theory in honors education is practical, to serve as a thinking tool. Theories, by their nature, are constructed, change, and may or may not mix well. They tend to introduce jargon and are often confused with methods-driven efforts. In spite of these complications, however, judicious use of theory offers honors educators perhaps the single best means by which we can make forward progress, learning from each other and sharing what we learn with the university committees that invest in honors programs.

In short, honors programs have a tremendous, but as yet unrealized potential to make a difference in the quality of higher education altogether. A more widespread use of theory-driven research is an important commitment towards realizing that potential.

The purpose of this paper is to present a case for theory-driven honors education. Honors educators should be difference makers on their campuses. They should make a profound difference in the learning experience of honors students. They may also play a pivotal role in campus education more generally, serving as local leaders about how to improve teaching and learning, how to maximize student learning both in and out of the classroom, and also how to incorporate a student focus into their universities. To accomplish this vision, honors educators need to learn to work more systematically themselves. The central premise of this paper is this: it is unlikely that honors education will make significant advancements without a theory to drive further development in thinking and practice.

## GOALS

Renzulli (1992) observed, "The history and culture of mankind can be charted to a large extent by the creative contributions of the world's most gifted and talented men and women." Few would argue with this statement. Indeed, many universities initiated honors programs with the express charge to locate, stimulate, and educate these gifted men and women. It is an important charge. In recent years, however, the emphasis in honors education, and certainly in writing on the subject, is more on the location and recruitment of these students than on their actual education. It is a concern driven, perhaps, by the status such students confer on a university.

Universities should do more with their honors programs. We have, as Renzulli (1998) pointed out, "a responsibility to develop gifted behavior, not just find and certify it." In other words, the focus of our business should be teaching and guiding the development of our most potentially able young people (Brown, 2001). Ideally, honors programs should do so in such a way that the whole university benefits from it.

Renzulli (1992) identified the major goals of honors education for grades K-12. These goals are adapted for collegiate education as follows:

- *Develop the talent potentials of gifted students.* The typical courses, programs, and other activities offered to college students in the general curricula may be insufficient to develop the talents and intellectual potential that gifted students have. Therefore, additional challenges and support need to be created. Different processes or methods may also be required (Brown, 2001; Renzulli, 1999).
- *Situate the honors program in the university as one of many programs designed to serve the entire student body.* An educated society is crucial to the success of democracy and the advancement of society. No group with special needs should be left out. Highly gifted and talented students have special needs as do many other groups. Neither they nor other groups should be disenfranchised.
- *Experiment with teaching and learning innovations.* Honors programs provide an opportunity to experiment precisely because they are unfettered by many of the curricular restrictions and serial course requirements common to the general curriculum. They are also blessed with smaller class size and highly motivated students, making honors courses ideal test sites to develop and test new teaching and learning innovations.
- *Transfer teaching and learning innovations from honors programs to general education in the university.* Honors programs will lose credibility if they do not give back what they have learned to the larger university. Honors programs should rightfully be judged as investments by universities or colleges, and colleagues should expect some return on that investment, not only in the realm of individual student achievement but also in the scholarship of teaching.
- *Support the continuous escalation of student engagement in both required and self-selected activities in and out of the classroom.* Honors programs should be designed to provide a trajectory that supports continued development and growth, not only in the pure intellectual sense but also in the social sense, in leadership and organization or in what Gardner (1985) would describe as multiple intelligences.
- *Infuse more effective practices into existing school structures.* All universities are going through a time of change. The most stable or sustainable changes occur from within the system. Thus, honors programs or colleges are often in a unique position to work as active change agents for the benefit of the entire school or university.

I would assert, however, that we don't know how to accomplish these activities in any systematic, comprehensive, or organized fashion. Although there are many collegiate honors programs nationally, there are few recognized scholars and no real recognized expertise in the area. As scholars, we don't know how to achieve our special goals because we haven't organized our thoughts and direction. The paradigm is thin. We have no means by which to analyze the error of our ways, to self-correct, or even to understand our successes. We need a theory to drive knowledge construction in honors education. If we consciously use and inter-relate the concepts and elements involved in the production of knowledge, we can become more effective and efficient in our efforts.

## **DISCUSSION OF 'THEORY'**

Before I go further, this is what I mean by the term "theory". I recognize fully that different disciplines use this term in different ways. I do not mean armchair pontification, rhetoric, or

hypothesizing (though hypotheses may be derived from theories). Rather, I define theory more formally, as a *set* of inter-related concepts, definitions, and propositions that specify how and why a phenomenon occurs. In other words, theory describes patterns among groups of concepts, events, or objects. When these propositions are validated by research, they are called principles. When they are logically deduced, they are called constructs (or in some fields, theorems). When the construct is put to the test, it is called a hypothesis. In other words, active theory use demands research as well (Novak & Gowin, 1984).

The most important function of a theory is to serve as a thinking tool. As such, theories are typically used to explain and predict phenomena, but they can also be used to plan, implement, and evaluate interventions. Theories should help us organize our ideas, identify our assumptions, and structure our conversations and work efforts. The last point may be most important to us.

Is there a theory appropriate to guide honors education? Not at this point. There are, however, a number of theories that have much to tell us and that, together, may move us forward. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the particulars of these theories, but we may draw on theory from adult education, gifted education, cognitive psychology, social psychology, and adolescent and adult behavior. Even so, we will inevitably also have to grow our own theory.

To start, we must choose a theory. Choosing an appropriate theory or theories is as crucial as the decision to use a theory. Theory application requires time, commitment, vigilance and follow-through. It is an investment in the future. As such, here are several precautions to keep in mind:

1. *“Just giving words for words doesn’t really tell you what anything means”* (Matthews, 1980). Theories tend to generate jargon and this jargon is often used to separate insiders from outsiders. In honors education we need to speak across all disciplines, to make ourselves understood by all. Therefore, the especial point of theory in honors education is not to pontificate, but to articulate; not to establish esoteric laws, but to ask and answer useful questions. We must beware of drowning in our own or others’ words.
2. *Not all theories mix well.* Complex issues such as honors education will require, by their nature, several theories to address the full panoply of questions and problems that need resolution. Theories tell us what questions to ask and what kind of responses to anticipate. Theory also works as the point of union between our general beliefs (or philosophy and world view) and our specific ideas and concepts. If multiple theories are combined on an *ad hoc* basis with conflicting philosophies and premises, they will inevitably generate confusing results and claims. On the other hand, our advancement in research, understanding, and practice will also suffer from too narrow a scope of theories being utilized. So, our selection and addition of theories must be done with careful consideration.
3. *Methods-driven teaching and research should not be confused with theory-driven teaching and research.* The easiest way to explain this statement is to provide an example. Active and collaborative learning are becoming quite popular in higher education, but as Hansen and Stephens (2000) noted in a recent article, collaborative learning has been treated more as a method than a mind-set or theory. The theory of collaborative learning says, in part, that students need to learn to become responsible for their own development; practice honesty, courage, care, and justice; be ready to question the shortcomings of their own work; and be held publicly accountable to others for their work. If collaborative learning or group work is assigned without also teaching students this mind-set, it will often devolve into social loafing with one student in the group doing the work for all with no realization of the value of teamwork. In other words, there is no magic in dropping a method into teaching; the method must be accompanied and practiced with the thinking and philosophy behind it to have any hope of working!

Methods-driven education or research is generally viewed as a negative activity from a scholarly perspective because it fails to make intellectual progress. While it may inform us about the particulars of a given process in the short term, it cannot take us beyond that process to higher levels of performance.

4. *Theories must change.* “The value of theories is derived not from their performance, but from their contribution to the generation of new and better concepts and practices” (Novak and Gowin, 1984). Theories should evolve; those that don’t must ultimately be discarded as useless. The hope in any theory-driven effort is that first, changes will result and second, those changes produce a keener understanding of the processes and events that occur within and across various contexts or settings of interest, changes that simultaneously improve the theory.

5. *Theories are not good or bad.* Theoretical mistakes are not simply wrong. Theories are constructed. They are more or less powerful, more or less useful, more or less insightful (Kuhn, 1996). When a theory fails, it is like a learner. It is an inadequate attempt to master a problem and improve through constructive self-correction. Having said that, we can leave off a theory that isn’t productive.

## SUMMARY

To conclude, honors educators should be difference makers. Higher education is entering a period of intense change. Honors programs could play a pivotal and powerful role in this change era, but only to the extent that we become better at, and more knowledgeable about, what we do. I issue a call to action: to use theory to drive our program decisions, designs, and interventions. Let us learn and share our results together to advance us all, just as our colleagues do in other disciplines. It is our challenge to engage in theory-building efforts for the benefit of gifted and talented students everywhere, and ultimately for the benefit of our future and for our society, overall. I shall look forward to sharing the good lessons learned in the future.

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