

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors  
Council –Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

---

Fall 2007

## Transformational Experience through Liberation Pedagogy: A Critical Look at Honors Education

John Mihelich  
*University of Idaho*

Debbie Storrs  
*University of Idaho*

Patrick Pellett  
*University of Idaho*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

---

Mihelich, John; Storrs, Debbie; and Pellett, Patrick, "Transformational Experience through Liberation Pedagogy: A Critical Look at Honors Education" (2007). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 45.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/45>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

JOHN MIHELICH, DEBBIE STORRS, AND PATRICK PELLETT

# **Transformational Experience through Liberation Pedagogy: A Critical Look at Honors Education**

**JOHN MIHELICH, DEBBIE STORRS, AND PATRICK PELLETT**

UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO

## **ABSTRACT**

**I**n the context of the national debate over the advantages and disadvantages of honors education, we developed a two-semester honors curriculum designed to draw upon the benefits of integrating teaching and research through student participation in an ethnographic research project. This paper recounts the process of the pedagogy and curriculum and discusses some key findings and outcomes of the students' ethnographic study. Liberation pedagogy framed the critical questions addressed in the ethnographic study exploring how students in honors programs make sense of their academic selves and their honors program. We emphasize student-researcher findings concerning status and elitism among honors participants and then reveal how engaging in research helped transform student-researchers' own self understandings. We conclude by arguing that liberation pedagogy through scholarship in discovery can serve as an effective tool to help honors participants construct more democratic ideals of honors programs and higher education in general. More importantly, liberation pedagogy can lead to a transformational educational experience as students engage in discovery and self-reflection.

## **INTRODUCTION**

A central concern of honors programs nationwide is the debate over individual and institutional benefits of honors programs and the inequalities such programs can perpetuate. The many benefits of honors programs are clear. Thriving honors programs enhance the academic reputations of institutions as they enable universities to recruit and retain "more intellectually motivated students to the university" (Pehlke 2003, 28). They also benefit students through unique curricula, small course sizes, innovative pedagogy, and "experimental interaction between faculty and students" (Pehlke 2003, 28).

However, honors programs have been criticized for benefiting only a small portion of students with advanced curricula and pedagogy. In comparing honors and non-honors courses, Barfelts & Delucchi (2003) found significant differences in curricula, interactions, and classroom tasks as students in honors courses experienced more opportunities to develop higher order thinking and reasoning skills. Considering how this differential experience adversely affects non-honors undergraduate education, Pehlke states that “Undergraduate education as a whole cannot afford to be left to the wayside while honors students and faculty focus on advanced forms of study, innovative seminars, and individualized advising that are not typically extended to the greater student body” (2003, 32).

Others have pointed out how the selective admissions policies of honors programs that rely on measures such as grade point averages and standardized testing limit access to honors education and, thus, unintentionally reproduce class and racial inequalities. Sociologists of education have revealed the class bias of standardized measures (Toutkoushian & Curtis 2005) and the contribution standardized testing to a “problematic ethics of access for students of color” (Pehlke 2003, 29). As such, these policies perpetuate class and racial disadvantage and limit the diversity of students as they restrict access to the benefits of honors programs.

In the context of this national debate over the advantages and disadvantages of honors education and whose interest it serves, we developed a two-semester honors curriculum consisting of a fall semester Introduction to Sociology course and a spring Special Topics Research course. Like other scholars, we recognize the benefits of integrating teaching and research through student participation in research projects (see for example Chang 2005; Harding 2002; and Mullin 2000). Taking advantage of the innovative pedagogical possibilities characteristic of honors courses, we designed the curriculum to introduce honors students to sociological methods and analysis and to engage students in an original ethnographic research project. Liberation pedagogy, which questions social hierarchy through asking particular research questions directed toward creating more liberatory and empowering social structures, served as the foundation for the courses in which this research was conducted (Feagin & Hernán 2001). Liberation pedagogy framed the critical questions addressed in the ethnographic study exploring how students in honors programs make sense of their academic selves and their honors program.

This paper recounts the process of the pedagogy and curriculum and discusses some key findings and outcomes of the students’ ethnographic study. We begin by discussing the course and the liberation pedagogy that guided our teaching and methodology and then briefly summarize the student-research

findings consistent with the literature on educational inequalities. We emphasize student-researcher findings concerning status and elitism among honors participants and then reveal how engaging in research helped transform student-researchers' own self-understandings. We conclude by arguing that liberation pedagogy through scholarship in discovery can serve as an effective tool to help honors participants construct more democratic ideals of honors programs and higher education in general. More importantly, liberation pedagogy can lead to a transformational educational experience as students engage in discovery and self-reflection.

## LOOKING CRITICALLY AT HONORS: THE COURSE & METHODS

The students began the research experience in the honors Introduction to Sociology course, which explored sociological theories, methods, and concepts through a primary focus on education. An upper-division honors course convened the next semester to conduct the ethnographic research project applying sociological critical theory to honors education through engaging students in the discovery of research. In this course, student-researchers engaged in an ethnographic study of honors participants' sense-making about honors education.

The research course embraced a "problem-posing" praxis rather than the traditional "banking" educational pedagogy. Freire contrasts the two dichotomous pedagogical approaches:

Banking education (for obvious reasons) attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way human beings exist in the world; problem-posing education sets itself the task of demythologizing. Banking education resists dialogue; problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality. Banking education treats students as objects of assistance; problem-posing education makes them critical thinkers. Banking education inhibits creativity and domesticates (although it cannot completely destroy) the *intentionality* of consciousness by isolating consciousness from the world. . . . Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality. . . (Freire 1970, 83–84)

The problem-posing pedagogy was aligned with liberation pedagogy's commitment to social justice and learner empowerment. Consistent with our field, sociology, key tenets of liberation pedagogy led to "looking beneath the surface" through interpretative and qualitative methods in order to

liberate individuals and challenge multiple forms of domination (Feagin & Hernán 2001). Such tenets shaped the pedagogy, ethnographic methodology, and research questions that engaged student-researchers in the upper-division course.

To help students see the connection between empirical reality and their own personal subjectivity intertwined with larger hegemonic educational ideologies, students studied critical sociological perspectives on education. The faculty encouraged students to look beneath the surface of hegemonic articulations of honors education through ethnographic methods that included participant observation, archival data, and interviews with honors participants.

The student-researchers and faculty members on the research team were all involved as students or teachers in the honors program under study. The team viewed the close involvement and membership in honors as an advantage and also employed “critical autoethnography” (Baker 2001; Defrancisco, Pruin, Kuderer & Chatham-Carpenter 2007) to inform the research. “Critical autoethnography” involves a reflective process in which researchers ask themselves difficult questions about a social environment in which they are members. Student-researchers participated in frank classroom discussions and engaged in reflective journaling to enhance their self-awareness, critical thinking, and learning. In the weekly journal reflections students shared their concerns, ideas, and thoughts about the research process. The use of reflective journaling was also consistent with the symbolic interactionist perspective as it could allow access to students’ internal meaning constructions (Hubbs & Brand 2005). The faculty intended the reflective journal to enhance students’ learning about themselves as student-researchers and the program in which they participated. Students also participated in online discussions with their research teams to discuss data, methodology questions, and any group issues that emerged. Journal entries and online discussions were not graded, but they were an important part of students’ overall participation requirement.

Engaging in educational research in the context of coursework posed concerns because of the power differentials that exist between instructors and students (Beatty & Brew 2004). Faculty recognized this potential for oppressive practices even as they envisioned the pedagogy in this honors course as aligned with emancipatory teaching (Ellsworth 1989). To address this issue, faculty offered students the opportunity to request that their journals entries not be used as data, although all students still were required to engage in journal reflection to assist in understanding and responding to their concerns during the research process. In addition, to clarify that the use of their journal entries as data was separate from the course, the faculty did not evaluate them for content.

The ethnographic project focused on an honors program with 500 members at a land-grant institution in the Northwest. Students conducted participant observation at numerous honors social events and cultural enrichment trips as well as various academic settings such as classes and panel discussions on graduate school. Student-researchers used a non-probability sampling technique called purposive or judgmental sampling in which they selected subjects to interview whom they considered typical of the wider honors-student population at this institution. Student-researchers interviewed other honors participants including thirty-seven honors students and ten administrators and/or faculty who taught in the honors program. In addition, they held a single focus-group discussion with four honors administrators. Interview questions focused on experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of honors courses, faculty, and higher education as well as individuals' educational autobiographies.

Student-researchers tape-recorded, transcribed, and coded interviews for sociological themes and patterns. Other student-researchers cross-reviewed the interview transcripts. They also analyzed and coded fieldnotes for similar themes. Exit surveys collected by the honors program for assessment purposes, honors advisory board members' email dialogues and meeting minutes, and honors program informational website materials were also coded for themes. Student-researcher journal entries were analyzed only by faculty researchers for evidence of a countersystem perspective, an ability to move beyond hegemonic understandings of society in favor of a more critical view (Feagin & Hernán 2001). We employed pseudonyms for the honors students interviewed, including student-researchers, for confidentiality reasons.

## **THE DISCOVERY PROCESS: CONVEYING THE HONORS DISTINCTION**

In the analysis of data, student-researchers discovered that their honors program constructed a distinct status and educational experience for honors students in a variety of ways. The unique academic relationships honors students experienced in high school and college played a central role in this construction process. A close relationship with high school teachers represented a common theme in honors students' educational histories. The majority of interviewees successfully completed several advanced placement classes during high school. Small class sizes and alternative pedagogical methods fostered more frequent interaction between students and their high school teachers. Honors classes in college replicated this experience. Honors professors formed a bridge connecting high school with college and eased the transition between the two by creating a comfortable environment, as Bonnie illustrated when she said, "You can get to know your professor a little more, more

like what I had in high school, more like what I am used to.” Honors students described such experiences as motivational. For example, Annie explained:

They’re just good professors—they’re like the best here. They really want to teach it; it’s just something they really enjoy. They’re excited about it and that’s what gets you excited about it.

Based on these findings, student-researchers concluded that honors students effectively interacted with honors faculty because of their previous educational capital. They recognized honors students’ university experiences provided continuity between college and their previous tracking experiences in advanced placement classes and that the educational process facilitated their cognitive and critical thinking skills in ways not accessible to most non-honors students.

In addition to specialized curricula, small classes, and preferred teachers, the university’s honors program provided its students with other resources including individualized academic advising, scholarships, a rich array of extracurricular events such as concerts, plays, and films, distinguished speakers, social occasions, and cultural enrichment trips to communities in the Pacific Northwest. The honors program also hosted a special convocation graduation ceremony. In conjunction with the special recognition at the university’s general graduation ceremony, these sanctioned activities signaled to students their special status. Student-researchers argued that their evidence suggested honors students’ status of distinction reflected social-class capital rather than simply merit. This conclusion came as no surprise as it was consistent with, and likely shaped by, the critical literature on the sociology of education students read in the course of their research (see, for example, Anyon 1980, Barfels & Delucchi 2000, Costa 1997).

## **IDENTIFYING WITH DISTINCTION: HONORS STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC IDENTITIES**

In addition to the organizational construction of the honors status, student-researchers also explored how the college experience played a key role in the construction of students’ identities (Kaufman & Feldman 2004). Given the cultural context in which students developed a sense of academic identity, students expectedly found that the vast majority (70%) of honors students interviewed felt themselves to be academically elite and deserving of academic privileges. Student-researchers noted that interactions with honors administrators and faculty afforded students opportunities to see themselves in such a light. While the college honors identity had formed relatively recently for honors students, they legitimized this identity and honors privilege through

recalling their academic past. This process of linking the past with the present is characteristic of those engaging in any identity transformation (Berger & Luckmann 1966/1986). Honors students in our study did so through consistently positioning themselves as skilled, curious, and gifted children. At the same time, students often revealed the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital as they discussed their parents' educational credentials. For example, Billy, whose parents earned higher educational credentials, typified the honors students interviewed. His comment revealed his family's educational cultural capital:

My mom went to Berkeley . . . my dad went to Harvard then came back and went to the University of Oregon and got a Masters in math.

Eric described his family in similar ways and connected his current honors status with his early exposure to reading and the transmission of cultural capital:

I got started real early on the whole biology thing and my mom, she's a marine biologist. . . . When I was a kid I went out with her over the summer to her research camps. And as far as reading goes I guess I just got started early and my parents read to me a lot . . .

Another honors student, Kim, explained that "academics have always been important" to her and attributed her academic success to both her parents and her work ethic:

. . . [My parents] are both teachers, so it's always been instilled that you need to get good grades and they haven't been harsh about it at all, they're just very supportive and helped me along the way and so I kind of established my own study habits and my own goals and personal standards.

Seventy-four percent of honors students interviewed had at least one parent with higher-educational credentials. In addition to educated parents, honors students entered the program with other significant advantages stemming from family privilege. The vast majority (90%) of the honors students we interviewed had past experience with special educational camps and/or advanced placement (AP) courses, enhancing their opportunities to develop critical thinking, reading, and language skills.

Honors students' previous academic experiences and successes led most to internalize honors' organizational and faculty expectations and identify themselves as different from "normal" students as Alfie revealed when she stated, ". . . as everybody knows . . . it's the cool thing to be a smart person."

One interviewee, Belinda, unabashedly explained she had participated in her high school honors program because she “. . . was smarter than everybody else.” Honors students’ academic identities directly linked to how others viewed them and their academic successes. Honors students described themselves as “motivated,” “competitive,” “over-achieving,” “determined,” “nerdy,” and “driven.” They discussed the need to live up to others’ expectations of their academic abilities. For example, Jane said that her peers “always labeled me the teacher’s pet and the smart kid,” and she identified herself primarily in terms of her academic abilities and success.

As a result of viewing themselves as academically elite, honors students desired processes that could help distinguish them from others. For example, one honors student, Joseph, was disappointed with the honors program and argued:

. . . it should be considerably more difficult to get into the honors college. This would give the program some prestige and make classroom interaction more even and enjoyable . . .

Joseph encouraged honors administrators to limit the number of incoming freshman in order to increase the prestige of the program. The honors student advisory board, which served as a liaison between the honors program students and administrators, also discussed the issue of admission. The advisory board met regularly to discuss extracurricular events, provide input on the selection of honors classes and seminars, and assist with the Honors Convocation. On several occasions the board discussed the selective nature of the admissions policy and engaged in email discussions concerning admissions following the meeting. In the following email exchange, two honors advisory board members discussed the strategy of raising grade point averages (GPAs) for continued inclusion in the honors program:

Rodney: I know that we will be discussing the GPA thing later, but what is the real reason for it? Are we trying to become a more elite group? Are there too many members and not enough resources? I would think that most anyone that wants to join the honors program should be able to. Think about it, mainly what we do is offer extracurricular activities that are culturally enriching. Honestly, I think the GPA is a tad high just because it does seem to make us an elitist group. What is the real purpose of the honors program? To earn an honors degree, or to shut people out because they don’t learn as well or as fast as everyone else? Thanks

Bob: I disagree with you about the GPA thing. I think the GPA needs to stay high because the honors program is intended for

honors students. There needs to be some criterion for students to fulfill in order to prove that they are honors-worthy. GPA, especially in college-level classes, is a good measure of this. Also, a few of the great things about being in the honors program are that it raises the intellectual bar in classes, the classes are smaller, and honors students receive priority registration. If the honors program became less competitive, then it would be less credible and less beneficial to the members who do qualify.

Rodney: Sure grades are important, and we should not completely drop the GPA requirement, but I think we are focusing on the wrong things. What if the criteria are a mix between grades and involvement? What if the more honors classes you take on average, the lower your GPA needs to be? Why should a 3.3 GPA student that takes a 1 credit honors seminar once a year be allowed in when a 2.9 GPA student that takes multiple honors classes a semester is left out. Think about it.

In this interaction, Rodney questioned the purpose of increasing GPA requirements for honors admission and, in doing so, illustrated his rejection of elitism. Bob took a different tack, arguing in favor of more exclusive acceptance criteria to enhance the value and therefore capital of the honors program and membership. In response, Rodney encouraged a broader consideration of the types of classes that might shape one's grade point average. The contrast in positions between Rodney and Bob reflected what student-researchers found among their honors sample, though more honors students were aligned with Bob's position.

One reason many honors students interviewed favored selective criteria was because it differentiated them from non-honors students in terms of academic abilities, with some even arguing that such abilities were innate. Others went further, arguing that their academic abilities ought to be rewarded with special opportunities that the honors program provided. For example, Tom displayed evidence of elitism in response to being asked how the honors program helped him:

. . . it's shaping a higher echelon of people. They're selective, yes, in their people. That's a good thing because you are making sure the people that want to do it are doing it versus just everybody getting this opportunity.

Opportunities that the honors program provided were salient to the honors students we interviewed. Despite the fact that many honors programs offer a "superior liberal arts education that forces students to stretch" (Lord

1998), two-thirds of the honors students we studied emphasized other outcomes or rewards associated with honors. Edgar was typical of the honors students we interviewed in his utilitarian explanation for why he joined the honors program:

Well . . . the main thing of course was the scholarship; that was the main thing for me. The other thing was the opportunity to sign up early for classes and that . . . ensures that you have the best chance that you can have an expedient education . . .

The majority of honors students interviewed cited their honors membership as important because of honors scholarships, early registration opportunities, career or graduate school mentoring and networking, and other extrinsic rewards. Perhaps because of the benefits of honors membership, the majority of honors students interviewed supported restricting access to the program through heightened eligibility requirements though they used arguments of special skills, status, and abilities to legitimize their positions.

While the vast majority of honors students interviewed embraced the distinctive status and its attributes concerning their academic abilities, some did not. Student-researchers found nearly a third (30%) of honors students interviewed resisted the distinction and its ideology concerning intelligence and academic superiority. For example, Daniel stated:

. . . to be honest the honors program is an arbitrary division. I mean I think there are amazingly bright students outside the honors program, and I think there are not so bright students in the honors program as well.

Another honors member discussed his concern that the honors program facilitated elitism. He argued:

I was a little disappointed in the attitude of superiority present in some of my peers that seemed to be fostered by the program . . . [and I] am concerned about the attitude of intellectual superiority that it seems to foster. On several occasions there was the sentiment that honors students are more intelligent than any non-honors students. I would hate to see the honors program foster the establishment of a class system within the university. If nothing else, sociology or a similar class should be required. In addition, I believe the program should be open to all that personally desire an opportunity for a more rigorous and diverse learning experience and the fact that it looks good on a resume or transcript should be de-emphasized.

Elitist posturing was a common and consistent theme emerging from the data, both among individuals who expressed this attitude and those who questioned the innate abilities that many students believed initially admitted them into the honors program. One individual wondered what could be done to minimize other members' superior and elitist attitudes:

It is the people that most often bother me. Many of them act like they are better than other students because they are honors students. That is the wrong attitude and those are the types of people I choose not to associate with. . . . I cannot think of what you can do to change people's attitudes when it comes to their status on campus. That would not be an easy task. Maybe there isn't anything you can do about it.

In an exit survey, a student echoed similar concerns:

Far too many people in the honors program carry with them an opinion of superiority over others. This can be felt within the program and from the advisors as well and made me not want to be a part of the program.

Another honors student desired “. . . a less elitist, scholarly attitude and activities that attracted a wider variety of people.” In one interview, Amber attempted to distinguish herself from other honors students by referring to other students in the honors program as “honors program people.” Yet another honors student, Alice, noted that some honors students found it difficult to let go of academic status obtained in secondary school. When asked why she did not participate in the honors ice cream socials and other activities exclusively designed for honor students, she replied:

Because, frankly, I don't always like the people that are in the program that participate in everything. . . . [Being valedictorian] is something that you should be proud of, but when you get into something like the honors program and you think that you're special because you were valedictorian in high school, you need to realize that you're in a group of people where you're no longer special for that reason. You're in a group of people, and 5 out of 6 of them are probably going to have relatively the same achievements that you do. It's not like that specific conversation comes up every time you have an interaction with somebody in the honors program, but it's definitely come up enough that I get frustrated and irritated and don't really want to associate with people that are in the program

because I don't feel like you should walk around and think you're so special because of that.

Alice's explanation revealed some contradictions. On the one hand, she rejected the notion of being academically special. This rejection did not stem from an understanding of how social and cultural capital were often linked to academic success. Instead, her rejection focused on the fact that there were other students with equal levels of academic skills, and, thus, honors students should not feel superior to others. Alice was representative of honors students interviewed who, at some level, rejected the bestowal of distinction but who simultaneously continued to embrace ideological assumptions about intelligence.

### **STUDENT-RESEARCHERS' TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCE: THE VALUE OF LIBERATION PEDAGOGY**

As a privileged group of students, honors students benefit from smaller classes, engaging pedagogies that develop higher-order cognitive skills, close relationships with faculty, specialized advising, scholarships, academic honors credentials, and academic distinction. However, people in dominant groups don't escape the negative consequences of privilege though often such group members are unaware of the costs (Johnson 2006). Student-researchers found the vast majority of the peers they interviewed experienced a sense of academic superiority and a focus on the extrinsic rewards associated with their honors membership. They also discussed and noted the societal costs that are incurred through reinforcement of meritocratic beliefs and the unequal distribution of quality education.

One way to minimize such costs is through teaching liberation pedagogy, which encourages students to understand the unequal nature of social relations and to take actions against it (Feagin & Hernán 2001). Liberation pedagogy is informed by Freire (1993), Giroux (1981), and other critical theorists who share the belief that this teaching/learning environment can enhance individuals' understanding of power in society and, as a result, open up new possibilities for social organization. In such a model, people are not "objects or recipients of political and educational projects, but actors in history, able to name their problems and their solutions to transform themselves in the process of changing oppressive circumstances" (Wallerstein & Bernstein 1994, 142.) Engaging students in research and critical self-reflection provides one way to accomplish action and transformation.

Through the course of the research project, faculty and students realized the possibility for student-researchers simply to echo what they thought

faculty wanted to hear. However, aside from establishing a rapport with students and providing, through open and frank exploratory discussion, a safe space for students to express their thoughts, faculty also designed journal assignments to allow for free expression of ideas. Specifically, journal contents were not graded. The researchers were confident that students' journal entries reflected their honest understanding as it developed through the project.

Among other values, journal entries demonstrated an enhanced understanding of equity in the context of honors education. Early on, student-researchers began to explore the link between honors and inequality despite the fact they were members of the program. For example, student-researcher Darlene wrote:

I am just fascinated with this idea of honors. Why do we even have the word and why does it apply to so many domains of social reality? Why do we feel the need to stratify society or to elevate certain members? Further, is a university honors program intended to promote "unusual academic achievement" and urge students to excel in academics? Does the reward give students extra drive to do well in school, or increase their motivation in desire for the label or recognition?

As student-researchers explored issues of elitism, inequality, and attitudes towards learning in their ethnography, they began to question their own participation in the honors program and their academic motivation and learning. As student-researcher Jane noted:

Interviewing is an interesting process to undertake as it makes you think about yourself, whether you would respond in a similar fashion, tons of other things that are important as well that you don't even think to think about!

Students' multiple identities as honors students and researchers required them to engage in self-analysis and reflection, often to their discomfort. Rick jotted the following questions to himself early on in his journal:

Why am I in honors? Get high off of the elitist tones? Enjoy the supposed superiority? Yes; most probably I do. What can I do/how can I make that better?

Student-researchers also critically evaluated how they benefited from the honors system. For example, Holly journaled about the confusion she felt as a result of the inequalities she perceived honors education reproducing. She wrote:

Do I do a directed study under the honors program or not? If I do it under the honors label, I'll be able to keep my scholarship. If I do the directed study under the sociology label, I won't have the scholarship, but I won't be colluding in a program with which I'm coming to have more and more problems with. I'm torn and don't know where to go. The money would be nice . . . and the scholarship would allow me to save more money. The money would be helpful when I graduate to pay off loans, help relocate, etc. but is it worth it? I don't know. I think I might feel guilty about taking the scholarship.

Holly ultimately decided to accept the directed study and scholarship. Although she had qualms about the privileges of her honors membership, she realized that, as a first-generation college student, academic scholarships were her only avenue toward financial security while most other students could count on family assistance. She arrived at some "peace of mind to have this knowledge and understanding" and noted that she was able to "critically look at [her]self and society in an attempt to better it."

Student-researchers, as revealed in their journals, also found the assigned sociology of education literature emotionally disturbing as they saw themselves in the studies they read. Students read a variety of articles on students' orientation towards learning (Holland 1990), student isolation (Evans & Eder 1993), and students' sense-making concerning animal dissections (Solot & Arluke 1997), among other articles that illustrated ethnographic approaches to education. Victoria said she was "surprised to find that the research did actually affect my sense of self." She was particularly taken by an article that explored strategies of identity construction by first-generation students in law school (Granfield 2003). A first-generation college student herself she noted,

I have started to see myself as very much "making it by faking it." I do have a desire to be seen as intelligent and scholarly, but it is mainly out of fear of disappointing others in my life.

She continued to discuss her desire to be accepted particularly by her conservative religious parents, a difficult situation in view of her recent identification as lesbian. She concluded the journal entry with this comment:

I think some people fake it because they want to feel a certain way and accomplish certain things. I, on the other hand, want others to feel a certain way. I really do want to make my parents proud, but I want to be happy too. . . . I know that this long road has just begun, but I know that by doing things like research projects where I reflect and look back at myself and my own life I can really figure out what is going on.

The readings and research participation also prompted students to reflect on their experience and selves in other ways. Some wrote more extensively on the theme of feeling less than sincere with their peers, teachers, and parents about who they were. Johnny, after reading an article on students who were isolated in school (Evans & Eder 1993), discussed his own construction of self:

I try very hard to project a certain sense of my self to the world at large. Part of this is that I am smart, part of it is that I am quirky and unusual. More recently I've seen the quirky/unusual side to be interfering with the smart projection. I'm angered by that but am also too stubborn to give up on the quiriness because I CAN'T be mundane or normal. . . . I'm better off maintaining what friends I have, even though I pretend, rather than risk revealing me—even if I do not become vastly more popular while pretending.

Another student-researcher, Kelli, agreed that honors students were successful, having “made it” because they could “fake it.” However, she noted a slow transition in her own attitudes towards the course and research requirements. She, along with other student-researchers, focused her attention on honors students' orientation towards learning and noted how students varied in their emphasis on learning and external rewards. Like other student-researchers, she found that honors students tended to emphasize either learning, citing the value of a liberal education, or grades, scholarships, and other extrinsic rewards associated with honors membership. Immersed in this analysis, she realized her own shift in attitudes:

The class and this research have forced me to evaluate myself and my motivations. I don't want to be a primarily extrinsically motivated student. I want to possess some of the intrinsic desires to learn that some of our interviewees had. . . . There's so much irony here. We are living what we're researching!

Another student-researcher, J.C., was majoring in engineering, which limited the number and type of electives she could take. Through the research she became more critical of the engineering curriculum, the type of skills it neglected, and the distinction bestowed upon her by her college-student status. She explained:

It has been disturbing to see that my classes keep me from the liberal education that I'd rather work toward. It's been sad to try and jump back into the fun, free-flowing, essay-writing classes when the rest of the classes seem to discourage the use of more than one part of your brain at a time and say “no way”

to communication skills. I realize that I'm lucky to even have the opportunity to be here because not everyone gets the chance nor do I believe that college will make me an "oh so better" person than anyone else.

Paul, a non-traditional student who once was employed in a post office, was reminded through the research how he had emphasized grades often at the expense of expanding his learning. He noted:

Regarding my academic experiences, I would have to say the one thing that has stood out for me over the past three years is to remember to enjoy the journey. I get so focused on grades at times and just jamming and cramming class material in my head that I forget to take advantage of the opportunity that I have to expand my boundaries and intellectual horizons.

In contrast to what he described as the monotony of paid labor, he felt privileged to have the opportunity to pursue his bachelor's degree. In his journal he encouraged himself to:

. . . slow down and remind myself of how fortunate I am. The grades are important, especially for where I want to go from here, but I cannot let them be the only reason I am attending college.

Through the ethnographic research, student-researchers developed a critical perspective on their academic engagement and identities. They came to understand how honors distinction was constructed and conferred through organizational practices and teachers, parents, and other individuals in their lives. They reflected on the social and cultural capital they held as a result of their family and social-class backgrounds and how these shaped their academic opportunities and skills. Ultimately they realized how they and others internalized the honors distinction in their academic identities. Forced to reflect and reconsider who they were as students, honors students began to ask difficult questions of themselves and, in the end, developed a conscious critique of education, honors, intelligence, and the construction of academic differentiation—not to mention how structural inequalities work in general. As a result of the discovery and self-reflection process, student-researchers demonstrated a transformation as students, as selves, and (we hope) as citizens.

Ironically, this transformational experience was made possible in this case study because of the privileges honors students receive through honors programs—the small course sizes, special attention, and innovative curriculum. However, such student discovery and transformation could also occur in non-honors courses, perhaps social-science capstone courses, through similar

ethnographic research opportunities. For example, students could explore student orientation to higher education, its distinctions and assumptions, with reference, for instance, to the principles of a liberal education outlined by William Cronon (1998). Students could also be encouraged to openly discuss and critique the ideals, values and substance of liberal education and reflect upon what it means to them (Mihelich 2005). The case for undergraduate student ethnographic research is based on this experience of students' empowerment through social-science knowledge, application, and self-reflection. Helping students develop their critical and self-reflective capacities as they study the world is a liberating experience for students. We conclude with Holly's testament that reflects this liberation:

I have learned so much about life and how the world works through this research. I feel I can engage in the world and critique it with a critical eye. I feel so much more knowledgeable and wise. . . . I think that once you have had your eyes opened and start to see how the world operates for the first time it becomes impossible to ever put the blinders back on. . . . I still have a long road ahead of me and it seems daunting at times but it is also incredibly exciting.

## REFERENCES

- Anyon, Jean. 1980. Social class and the hidden curriculum of work. *Journal of Education* 163: 67–92.
- Baker, Dori Grinenko. 2001. Future homemakers and feminist awakenings: Autoethnography as a method in theological education and research. *Religious Education* 96 (3): 395–407.
- Barfels, Sarah & Michael Delucchi. 2000. A class above the rest: The hidden curriculum of work in higher education. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 5 (1): 63–76.
- Barfels, Sarah & Michael Delucchi. 2003. History reproduces itself: The transmission of symbolic capital at a private liberal arts college in the USA. *Teaching in Higher Education* 8 (2): 181–194.
- Beatty, Brenda & Christine Brew. 2004. Trusting relationships and emotional epistemologies: A foundational leadership issue. *School Leadership and Management*, 24, 3, 329–356.
- Berger, Peter & Thomas Luckmann. 1966/1986. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* Garden City: Anchor Books.

## TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCE THROUGH LIBERATION PEDAGOGY

- Chang, Hasok. 2005. Turning an undergraduate class into a professional research community. *Teaching in Higher Education* 10 (3): 387–394.
- Costa, Victoria. 1997. Honours chemistry: high-status knowledge or knowledge about high status? *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 29 (3): 289–313.
- Cronon, William. 1998. ‘Only connect’: The goals of a liberal education. *American Scholar* 67 (4): 73–80.
- Defrancisco, Victoria Pruin, Jennifer Kuderer & April Chatham-Carpenter. 2007. “Autoethnography and women’s self-esteem: Learning through a ‘living’ method.” *Feminism and Psychology* 17(2):237–243.
- Denzin, Norman. 1988. Act, language, and self in symbolic interactionist thought. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 9: 51–80.
- Ellsworth, Ellen 1989. Why doesn’t this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Education Review* 59 (3), 297–324.
- Evans, Cathy & Donna Eder. 1993. “No exit” processes of social isolation in the middle school. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22 (2): 139–170.
- Feagin, Joe & Vera Hernán. 2001. *Liberation Sociology*. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Freire, Paulo. 1993. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freyman, Jay. 2005. What is an honors student? *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 6 (2): 23–30.
- Granfield, Robert. 2003. Making it by faking it: Working-class students in an elite academic environment. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 20 (3): 331–351.
- Giroux, Henry. 1983. *Ideology, Culture, and the Process of Schooling*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Harding, Jennifer. 2002. Talking about homelessness: A teaching and research initiative in East London. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 7 (1): 81–95.
- Holland, Dorothy & Margaret Eisenhart. 1990. “Schoolwork for what?” in *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture*, 163–180. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hubbs, Delaura & Charles Brand. 2005. The paper mirror: Understanding reflective journaling. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 28 (1): 60–71.
- Johnson, Allan G.. 2006. *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Kaufman, Peter & Kenneth Feldman. 2004. Forming identities in college: A sociological approach. *Research in Higher Education* 45 (5): 463–396.
- Lord, Lewis. 1998. Choosing an honors experience. *U.S. News & World Report*, 125: 8.

- Mihelich, John. 2005. Liberal education and transcending the silkworm. *Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue*, 7 (1/2): 23–38
- Mullins, Dail Jr. 2005. What is honors? *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 6 (2): 19–22.
- Mullin, Carol. 2000. Linking research and teaching: A study of graduate student engagement. *Teaching in Higher Education* 5 (1): 5–21.
- Pehlke, Joy. 2003. The myth of an honors education. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* 4 (2): 27–33.
- Solot, Dorian & Arnold Arluke. 1997. Learning the scientist's role: Animal dissection in middle school. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 26 (1): 28–54.
- Toutkoushian, Robert & Curtis Taylor. 2005. Effects of socioeconomic factors on public high school outcomes and rankings. *Journal of Educational Research*, 98 (5): 259–271.
- Wallerstein, Nina & E. Bernstein. (1994) Introduction to community empowerment, participatory education and health. *Health Education Quarterly* 21(2): 141–48.

\*\*\*\*\*

The authors may be contacted at

[dstorrs@uidaho.edu](mailto:dstorrs@uidaho.edu).

