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Fall 2005

Teaching Honors

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Schuman, Sam, "Teaching Honors" (2005). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 181.

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SAM SCHUMAN

Teaching Honors

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Jay Freyman's discussion of "What is an Honors Student?" sent me off on the somewhat quirky tangent of asking, "So What is an Honors Teacher?" Even quirkier, my musings led me to the conclusion that the best answer was provided by John Lennon and the Beatles: "all you need is love."

I'll return to John Lennon in a moment, but first let me follow Professor Freyman's example, and begin with a couple of disqualifiers.

Honors faculty members do not need to be the most popular instructors on campus. That is not to say that there is an inverse relationship between successful honors teaching and popularity. (Although I remember to my horror discovering when I became Honors Director at the University of Maine several eons ago that the program had somehow become a dumping ground for the most unpopular teachers on campus, whose department chairs and deans realized they could pawn off on the Honors Program problem faculty members whose classes were perennially under-enrolled!) Sometimes potentially splendid honors faculty can be women and men who are especially rigorous, for example, and have a reputation for being highly demanding—not always a path to all-campus popularity. Sometimes, too, they can be a bit eccentric in ways that might be off-putting to some students, but charming to the best students. Conversely, while it is certainly not always the case, at least sometimes rather shallow faculty members who are skilled classroom performers can achieve a kind of popularity that does not correspond to the lasting quality of instruction they are offering. The best honors instructors will be popular with honors students, but honors students' pantheon of great teachers will not always conform to that of the entire student body.

Honors faculty do not need to be devoted to the Socratic, discussion, or seminar modes of instruction. I think there is a general assumption that all honors classes need to be interactive, and indeed, most are. But great lecturers can be wonderful teachers, too. Particularly at small colleges where the usual mode of instruction is discussion, an occasional brilliant lecturer can be a splendid addition to the roster of honors teachers. It does seem to me that virtually all fine honors teachers will find some means of inviting and responding to students' questions—honors students probably want and need to be questioners. But I've come to believe that not all honors classes have to involve pedagogical give-and-take. Great teaching can happen in virtually any pedagogical venue, and when it does, it can be great honors teaching.

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What, then, *do* great honors teachers have in common? Let me, as it were, “get back” to the Beatles.

I think that honors teachers need to love their subject matter, and they need to love their students, and they need to love bringing them together.

The first is surely obvious. It is hard to imagine a fine teacher who is teaching something she or he doesn't care, and care deeply, about. Show me a literature teacher who does not read novels or plays or poetry or short stories in her spare time, and I will show you someone whose Shakespeare class I don't want to attend. Conversely, show me a statistician whose enthusiasm over a page of numbers cannot be curbed, and I'll show you a math course worth taking. As I think back to my undergraduate days, the teachers whose classes I remember most distinctly were inevitably those whose passion for their subject matters was most intense.

But one can love one's material and channel all that love into the solitary work of the research scholar. Great researchers can be great teachers, but only if they genuinely care for the students they are teaching. In my quarter-century of academic administration I have noticed an interesting trend: as faculty members age, some of them grow to dislike students while others come to like them more and more. It is easy, when one is 25, to interact with pleasure with students who are twenty. For many it is more difficult, and for some it is impossible, when the gap is thirty or forty years rather than a half-dozen. Those are the faculty members who complain, ever more loudly with each passing year, that today's students are inferior to yesterday's, that they don't know how to read, they are afraid to work, they don't respect their professors, that they lack intellectual curiosity. It can be difficult to resist the temptation to point out to such complainers that maybe part of the problem is that each year they grow a year further from their students and that bridging the growing gap is really more their responsibility than that of the students. On the other hand, I know many faculty members in their 60's and 70's (and 50's and 80's, too) whose affection for college-age people grows stronger with each passing year. For these teachers, each new year brings a deeper appreciation for the enthusiasms, the franknesses, the conventions and the pure teachability of the young. These are our best honors teachers. In honors programs at larger institutions, faculty often have the opportunity, usually reserved for small college professors, to know students over multiple academic terms, to watch them grow and develop, to see the seeds planted in the first year bearing fruit in the fourth.

Finally, fine honors teachers love serving as matchmakers between material about which they are passionate and students of whom they are fond. They are the teachers who come out of a good class as high as a kite and with more energy than when they went in. They are the faculty members who enjoy being called “teachers” as well as “professors” or “faculty members.” They are the teachers who want to know what becomes of their students in five or ten or twenty-five years. They are teachers who, when they get a friendly e-mail from a former student who is now a teacher herself, will glow for days. They work at teaching, and

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work hard, and despair when it does not go as well as they want, and exult when it goes better.¹

It might be argued that I am describing fine teaching, honors or not. By and large, I plead guilty: as a general rule, I believe that fine honors teachers are fine teachers anywhere, that great teachers elsewhere in the curriculum will excel in honors courses. Conversely, really bad teachers teach really poorly everywhere, alas. In addition to the two characteristics I've already specified (knowing students over time; offering ample opportunities for questions), I do think that there are a few traits somewhat more characteristic of honors teaching. Honors courses and honors teachers tend to ask students to assume a larger proportion of the burden of teaching themselves than in equivalent courses elsewhere in the curriculum. I've observed that there seems to be a slightly higher willingness to experiment with new and different pedagogies among honors teachers and that they tend to keep experimenting throughout their careers. And honors teachers tend to push students to move beyond the confines of the syllabus more often, perhaps, than their non-honors counterparts—to read the extra book, write the extra paper, investigate the unassigned problem. There are, then, a few significant idiosyncrasies and particularities in teaching honors students, but by and large fine honors teaching and fine teaching are very close kin.

“What is an Honors Teacher?” She or he is a person with some brains and some skill, but mostly someone who is in love with teaching.

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¹ A small caveat. If a college is rightly defined as Mark Hopkins at one end of a bench and a student at the other, you still need the bench. For fine teaching, including fine honors teaching, to happen, there must exist an institutional culture which permits, or at the very least does not preclude, such work. Such a culture must, for example, recognize that there is legitimate reason to offer honors instruction to students with above-average talent or motivation. It must not punish faculty members for teaching small classes at the undergraduate level. It should not regard honors instruction as uncompensated overload labor. It cannot react negatively to faculty members who appeal to particularly strong students. And, finally and quixotically perhaps, there must be an institutional culture which gives to honors faculty and honors students the time and the space to work with thoughtful reflection, to teach and to learn with focus and intensity, to create an environment of contemplation at least sometimes removed from the constant turmoil of life, including academic life.

