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2011

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Braid, Bernice and Palma De Schrynemakers, Gladys, "Conservation, Experimentation, Innovation, and Model Honors Programs" (2011). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 314. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/314>

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Conservation, Experimentation, Innovation, and Model Honors Programs

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Scott Carnicom, we agree, is correct in noting that most honors programs today draw students together in an intellectual oasis that includes “individualized teaching practices (e.g. independent research, tutorials, small classes)” and that is, in fact, “conserving the liberal arts tradition that is consistent with Aydelotte’s vision.” While we agree with this description, we contend that it is incomplete, that conservation, though important, is but one component of effective honors programs. Drawing from a variety of samples across the country, we have found that the most successful ones share a common configuration, a trilateral approach: beginning with conservation; fostering an environment of experimentation for learners and mentors; and producing innovation in pedagogy, student learning, and research. The synergy created among these three emphases is essential to preserving the vision and values that pervade all high-quality honors programs.

These three key elements are equally important for the whole of higher education because they provide a structure for building rigor and relevance in the curriculum and for supporting student success. An additional role for honors programs should thus be academic leadership. The overarching commitment of honors to liberal learning is especially relevant today, given the pressure from various constituencies to focus on career preparation at the expense of traditional education. Carnicom understands this potential barrier to liberal learning: “Society,” he observes, “has become more focused on how the professoriate grades than how we teach, and a college education is viewed as a simple, transitory commodity to be traded for a high-paying vocation.”

Experienced faculty teaching in honors programs also understand this threat and often are the stakeholders who move their colleagues to develop a learning environment that is receptive to and advances new ways of considering what and how students learn. Achieving this alternative paradigm requires looking beyond inherited methods of teaching to find a laboratory where students and faculty can examine all aspects of the human condition and can make connections to construct an authentic life. “This means a life

that accepts no belief as authoritative simply because it has been handed down by tradition or become familiar through habit, a life that questions all beliefs and accepts only those that survive reason's demand for consistency and for justification" (Nussbaum 9).

In his conclusion, Scott Carnicom notes: "The better reason to value honors, however, is that it fosters the best educational practices of our culture's history, maintains a tradition of critical inquiry that transcends disciplinary boundaries, promotes creativity, and prepares students to become learners, thinkers, innovators, and leaders for the rest of their lives." If we want to assess the contributions of honors to post-secondary education, we need to pinpoint some of its precise enabling characteristics to appreciate the depth of its accomplishments. Among them should be the structures within programs that engender integrative learning, approaches to curriculum that sustain creativity, and practices that ensure genuine development among faculty who become involved with teaching in honors.

One fundamental attribute of model honors programs is a variety of experiential learning, from laboratories to service learning to student co-teaching to original research and beyond. As early as 1979, Ormond Smythe wrote about the ramifications of immersion learning and practical experiences in the context of liberal arts, and concluded:

Theoretical study and critical thought are essential as sources of form, structure, and discipline. But in the absence of real acts with real consequences, the discipline is incomplete, and the moral aspect of liberal education becomes as abstract and as remote from the practical as is metaphysics. This is where experiential learning may make its most profound contributions to the liberal arts—and this is where the liberal arts most need a healthy dose of real experience. (11–12)

His points were brought home to us in an early NCHC Faculty Institute on City as Text™ (CAT) in El Paso. As a guest facilitator, he participated throughout the program. He commented at the end that for the first time he saw Kolb's entire experiential learning wheel spin around twice in three days, and he helped us to articulate the results in both our perception of crossing borders (El Paso/Juarez) and our understanding of how our own lens sought out the images on which we reported.

As NCHC members know, the use of the CAT approach to experiential learning is increasingly common among honors programs. Consider that the larger context of any inquiry takes students outside a classroom into the world and does so in a way that locates them in the object of exploration, shifting their framework and deepening their insight. Being implicated—or, as we say

during CAT forays, being participant/observers—changes the inquiry and the inquirer. Those of us who teach in honors and direct programs need, therefore, to find a means of expanding classes to embrace this kind of open and open-ended experiential learning.

One avenue toward this kind of learning is the creation of new academic structures. Typically such innovations require the sort of flexibility and independence offered by honors programs. Honors courses that satisfy graduation requirements but are designed by honors faculty are one starting point. These courses can be sequenced to move from concrete accumulation of knowledge to comparative analysis and inventive modes of pursuing new knowledge; a full four years of honors involvement allow this sequencing. Modest adjustments in scheduling permit the inventing of whole course clusters, innately cross-disciplinary if they function as a whole, into which experiential laboratories can be inserted to promote student engagement in the process and ownership of the product.

Programs that include sufficient course credit to provide a robust interaction among students and between students and faculty (enabled by an honors center, the seminar format of courses, and all the elements mentioned by Carnicom) result in a learning community that is enriched by a variety of disciplinary expertise and thus multiple languages of discourse, each rooted in disciplinary depth but expanding into a broader context. Advanced honors electives, if they persist in their cross-disciplinary thrust, become agents of sustained, high-level intellectual conversation that is a powerful antidote to the sometimes mindless and contradictory culture flourishing around our students. In complex programs, honors students who continue their participation throughout their undergraduate study emerge with the skills to analyze their world, and to enter that world with a nuanced grasp of how to understand it.

A seldom-discussed value of honors programs is curricular collaboration. Complex programs that focus on experiential learning can have an extraordinary impact on the faculty who teach in them. In our own experience of the planning sessions required for teamwork, the going is often rough: a perpetual atavistic pull drags us all back to our ancient memory of long-gone professors. Everyone needs to set those memories aside in order to construct together the shape and content of cross-disciplinary courses. Persistence in honors among faculty often suggests, however, that despite the initial difficulty of accepting the approaches of our colleagues, the excitement of the courses and rewards of working with students in new ways is sufficient to bring us back again and again.

Even individually presented coursework, when it is vetted by honors committees that include substantial participation of students among the faculty, has a transformative effect, largely because student commentary on the

proposal stages of a course design is often surprising. Inevitably faculty making proposals express awe and admiration once they have submitted to this kind of peer review, which is powerful, persuasive, and usually unfamiliar. This process at our university led us to see engagement with honors as an opportunity for deep professional development.

One of us, Gladys Palma de Schrynemakers, teaches a social science core course and advanced honors electives in the LIU Brooklyn University Honors Program. The social science core course introduces lower-division students from various majors to disciplinary theories and practices, exploring a framework of societal issues through the lens of a multi-disciplinary approach that includes history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and political science. The interdisciplinary and trilateral structures of the course are linked by using what Martha Nussbaum refers to as Socratic pedagogy, an approach that allows students to “learn to probe, to evaluate evidence, to write papers with well-structured arguments, and to analyze the arguments presented to them in other texts” (55) .

By the end of the semester, students are not simply participating in the discussion but are leading the dialogue as they present their own original, theory-based research in poster presentations. For example, one student applied Erving Goffman’s theory of “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” and applied it to social media like Facebook. The student surveyed a Facebook group to furnish her data. The research was presented in class, at an annual NCHC conference, and at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR). The student then continued her research and presentations well beyond the semester while pursuing her pharmacy degree.

An advanced honors elective, *Somebody’s Watching Me: Reality Television and its Audiences*, is a course that examined “popular factual programming,” better known as Reality TV. The course provided students with an outline of the medium’s developmental process, including its historical roots in *Candid Camera*. Other related media included formatted game shows, “real crime” shows, talent shows, “make me over” shows, and individual postings on You Tube. This course allowed students to investigate the sociological, psychological, and philosophical reasons for the success of Reality TV and how multimedia have helped to propel the experience beyond traditional television venues to younger, computer-savvy generations. Using a multimedia approach, students looked carefully at reality programming, particularly in the context of debates it has stimulated in our social and cultural world. An open-source program called Moodle gave students the opportunity to view videos, read blogs, and post written assignments online. The content of the course, the experiential component, and the use of technology created a dynamic learning laboratory for both students and the professor. In

particular the use of academic blogs was a way to “. . . use technology within a constructivist framework[;] . . . such technologies can generate enormous conceptualization power and thus guide our thinking to a deeper and more complex understanding of our student learning, unfettered by one-dimensionality or tied to any one teaching style or method of assessment” (Palma de Schrynemakers 47) .

The multimedia course was specifically designed as a learning laboratory where students could experiment with multiple understandings and expressions of their individual and collective experiences, producing an authentic learning situation. The course created the kind of open-ended dialogue where students “. . . in mutual pursuit of a project [find] additional new perspectives open [and where] language opens possibilities of seeing, hearing, understanding. Multiple interpretations constitute multiple realities; the common itself becomes multiplex and endlessly challenging, as each person reaches out from his/her own ground toward what might be, should be, is not yet” (Greene 21) .

Technology played an important role in the course, helping students construct their own foundation of knowledge and providing this professor with opportunities to develop technology-based formative assessment and to share scholarship about this development in a book chapter. The trilateral configuration of this and similar courses—conservation, experimentation, and innovation—posed unique challenges but was a productive and valuable strategy for enriched teaching and enhanced learning.

The particular details of the ‘innovative’ in honors programs, we believe, have to do with structure, integrative curriculum, primary research, experiential learning, and the lasting impact on faculty who teach in model programs. Other dimensions, too, are important. The relationship of honors to its campus is *sui generis* and can be deeply innovative in its academic structure, in the social element of energetic programs, and in the peculiarly useful marketing these programs provide on behalf of the entire institution. On a national scale, the conceptual apparatus in honors programs that confronts and overcomes fragmentation, that aims intentionally at coherence, was an important innovation when the honors movement took hold in the 1950s and no doubt influenced, decades later, the initiation of learning communities throughout higher education.

The stress on pedagogy in the service of discovery and active learning is equally innovative and has moved us all toward modes of inquiry as an acceptable approach to original research. Above all, the replicability of all the strategies implemented in honors is a great gift to higher education. Contrary to Mark C. Taylor’s critique of education as privileging only the rich, an organically evolved honors model exhibiting all of the attributes mentioned

in this discussion is the epitome of democracy in action, and it offers an example of how to address his key complaint:

This endless fragmentation inhibits communication across departmental boundaries, the university dissolving into an assemblage of isolated silos. The curriculum lacks coherence, integration and overall purpose. The challenge of effective reform is to find ways to create a balance between in-depth study in a particular area and research on emerging problems and questions that do not readily lend themselves to a single disciplinary approach. (139–140).

Carnicom links liberal learning and honors programs. In Taylor's terms, this linkage is a bulwark against vocationalization of undergraduate education for students from fields outside arts and sciences. If programs consciously embrace their potential and willingly create courses and experiences that challenge the silos, they do more than conserve liberal learning; they liberate students and, we suggest, faculty.

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