

Intellectual Risk

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Abstract: Intellectual risk works, but it requires creating the space to fail in honors.

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I rarely speak in the honors freshman seminar I facilitate. It strikes my colleagues as strange and, at least in the first few weeks of the semester, leaves the students confused. I usually get a “Why can’t you just tell us what you want us to say?” question, followed by a frustrated “I just want to know what you want me to think about this.” I am left repeating what I’ve said the first few classes and written in the syllabus: “I want you to tell me what you think, what evidence you are drawing on, and how that comes into conversation with other viewpoints” coupled with “we all need to learn to listen.”

At the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi, I approach the classroom with three general rules: respect human dignity, come prepared, and create space to fail. Creating the space for failure is an essential component of my approach to honors education and what I believe to be the core of the honors course. In teaching more than a dozen honors freshman seminars, I have learned that our students have been trained to be risk-averse and GPA-minded, a reality heightened by the labels “high-achieving” or “honors.” Nationwide our students come to their first year from a variety of backgrounds, and this is especially true in Mississippi. Some leave private school education, where parents paid more per year in tuition than they will in university fees. Others come out of school environments where desks are broken, lunch periods are held in silence under teacher observation, and 1980s textbooks have to be shared between small groups.

Creating space for failure in honors works because it demands that we make ourselves intellectually and emotionally vulnerable. Intellectual risk brings great reward. In seminar, I ask questions as a framework for discussions based on big ideas like justice, equality, and the human condition. Essays receive feedback and big loopy “Why??”s and “Tell me more—use evidence.” Absent is the traditional grade, resulting in office hours filled with outrage and frustration but also, and more importantly, improvement in writing and critical thinking.

Creating the space for failure is also my approach as a faculty member. I know what types of assignments, food, and books will bring about glowing teaching recommendations, yet each semester I throw out my syllabus from the previous year and start with the questions, “What do I want to learn this year? What is going to be hard but worthwhile? How can I meet a need in my community?” In this way, I have the opportunity to live honors in ways that might not work or go the way I planned. Last year my honors students and I worked with a local farmer’s market to assess community needs, collect data, and offer solutions to improve access to fresh produce in a state characterized by food deserts, where more often than not, the only grocery store is the local gas station or Dollar General. The semester created many challenges but also some small successes.

I rarely speak in the honors freshman seminar I facilitate, yet experience tells me that this is how to create the space for students to take intellectual risk, to come prepared, and to learn to engage each other in ways that value human dignity and prompt them to think deeply about how and why.

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