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Salas, Angela M., "Nontraditional Honors and the Hopefulness of Summer Reading" (2013). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 378.

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Nontraditional Honors and the Hopefulness of Summer Reading

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In the summer of 2012, I had the good fortune to have my summer session course cancelled as a result of low enrollment. While unexpectedly losing a course and a salary was unpleasant, I undertook a reading program designed to help me improve our first-year honors classes. The sequence, Honors 103 and 104, is known as the Common Intellectual Experience (CIE), and it fulfills multiple general education requirements for all but our nursing students. In the course of the year, students read and respond to four texts (generally paired fiction and nonfiction works), prepare a guided, independent research project, give at least five speeches, prepare to attend and participate in a conference, and create and update an electronic portfolio, which they augment throughout their honors program experience. They blog, write, and revise papers of various lengths, learn how to write annotated bibliographies, and prepare paper abstracts. They are mentored by more senior students and learn to mentor others.

My self-directed summer seminar in pedagogy and educational theory resulted in a leaner, more efficient syllabus for the first semester. For example, I replaced the requirement that students edit highlights from their speeches, a requirement that had nothing to do with our educational outcomes and that had made students cry with frustration at using clunky video editing software, with a requirement that they view their speeches and then post their reflective observations on Oncourse so that everyone in our small classes had the opportunity to read and respond to them, which they did with good grace and insight. In all things, I sought to decenter the class and allow students to take charge of their own progress.

The pedagogy I synthesized from all the fine ideas of fine thinkers should have led to an excellent classroom experience. Instead, it flopped. Rather than being empowered, students were anxious. They sent me frantic emails about margins and type-size, asked me to tell them if I agreed with their peers' commentary about speeches and papers, hovered at my office door before class, and followed me the five feet from the classroom back to my office, wondering if I would "dock" them if their resource materials were short. I cannot remember ever having worked with more fearful students.

In the midst of my confusion, I read the essay on “Nontraditional Honors” by Janice Rye Kinghorn and Whitney Womack Smith, and it offered me reminders about the fears and insecurities students carry with them. It also offered me the opportunity to reconsider the behaviors I was seeing in my class. I grew to see student insecurity less as a problem they were imposing on me and more as a consequence of their prior bad experiences, which I had an obligation to help them overcome.

The essay also clarified the surprising limitations of assumptions we have been working under since the Indiana University Southeast Honors Program was founded in 2006. The majority of our students are nontraditional, whether in age, life experience, financial independence, or familial responsibilities, but our honors program is anchored in courses with defined meeting times, required face-to-face meetings with the director, and on-campus co-curricular activities. We have proceeded under the premise that offering “a liberal arts education on a university campus” cannot occur without intensive interactions in “real time.”

Within the IUS Honors Program, one of the primary reasons for student attrition is scheduling difficulties: conflicts both with required courses in the major and with the demands of student life. In an attempt to make more courses available to our students, we partnered with the IUS Master of Liberal Studies (MLS) Program, cross-listing MLS and HP offerings and thus including more evening and one-meeting-per-week course options for our students. Generally, fewer than four of our sixty-plus students have taken these MLS offerings each semester, and students not making progress through the honors requirements still cite scheduling difficulties as the reason.

Before reading Kinghorn and Smith’s essay, I had been tempted to give up on the scheduling problem, convinced that we in the honors program had done our best for our students, but, after reminding myself that about seventy percent of our students are nontraditional, I consulted my supervisors and secured their blessing to offer an upper-level honors seminar entirely online. I am now immersed in our campus’s online academy as well as in such texts as Salman Khan’s *One-World Schoolhouse: Education Reimagined*, Palloff and Pratt’s *The Excellent Online Instructor: Strategies for Professional Development*, and Boettcher and Conrad’s *The Online Teaching Survival Guide: Simple and Practical Pedagogical Tips*. If I am able to offer my students an excellent and successful honors experience in this course, I hope to offer my faculty colleagues guidance if they wish to pursue this possibility. With some trepidation, I also hope to offer one section of our CIE classes each semester as an entirely online offering.

What makes the possibility of offering CIE courses online daunting is the question of how we can go about developing academic competencies and a sense of community without regular, in-person interactions. I am not sure how it will work to give and respond to speeches without an audience or how we can make sure that students read and respond to each other's ideas with kindness, tact, and rigor if they do not know each other. However, the chance to meet students' scheduling and educational needs simultaneously seems worth trying if the pilot project goes well in the fall.

In the meantime, I have reconsidered the Honors 104 syllabus for this semester, easing myself and my students into classroom conversation via blogs and forums. I respond publically to forums like a classmate but embed private observations about ways individual authors can revise, streamline, or expand their ideas so that students receive constructive suggestions from me without the potential embarrassment of public commentary. Students have been flexible about this hybrid model of intellectual interaction, making me hopeful about the possibilities of an entirely online class.

Thus it is that the draft of a *JNCHC* article I read in the fall has cast new light on my previous summer reading and has propelled the IUS Honors Program into a new and unsettling pedagogy for the fall and beyond. My new goal is to help meet the needs of nontraditional students with nontraditional courses, and, while I am at it, we might start rethinking our campus-bound co-curricular offerings. . . .

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