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An Honors Student Walks into a Classroom: Inviting the Whole Student into our Classes

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Abstract: This paper explores the risky proposition of encouraging students to question deeply held values and beliefs. After connecting honors pedagogy with transformative learning theory, the author encourages faculty who are willing to take this risk to consider involving the whole student and not simply their cognitive aspects. The author then explores whole student pedagogy and transformative learning, positing how these can be present in the honors classroom. Finally, the use of critical reflection as a tool that facilitates interaction with the whole student is discussed, with suggestions as to how it might most effectively be incorporated into the honors classroom.

Keywords: whole student pedagogy; transformative learning, critical reflection; theory of self-knowledge; effective teaching

In his lead essay to this forum, Cognard-Black explores what he calls the “romanticized version” of honors. Asking us to create a learning environment that challenges students at a deeper level, Cognard-Black quotes Robertson (1966):

the classroom experience must pose a threat. The student must be threatened; he must be driven outside himself; he must be compelled to question himself and his values and the values of those among whom he lives.

Robertson’s proposal is indeed a risky proposition and one to which honors faculty should aspire. However, this risk also fills me with fear, though not the fear that one might think. While I applaud the desire to create a learning environment that causes the honors student to deeply question and explore the values that she or he holds, my fear is that without a willingness to go on the

journey with the honors students, honors faculty are creating an environment that may very well inhibit both deep questioning and value exploration. As a result, I encourage honors educators to take a risk beyond Cognard-Black's learning environment that asks students to "suffer exposure to threatening material or to question orthodox teachings, propose unconventional solutions, or question one's own assumptions." I encourage those who create this environment to risk exploring, with students, the impact of these risks to an individual that go beyond simple learning and critical thinking and instead reach the whole honors student.

TRANSFORMATIVE HONORS

Honors pedagogy challenges students to examine their values and to step outside of themselves in this exploration. According to Taylor (2011), this self-evaluation is a hallmark of transformative learning, which

involves the most significant learning in adulthood, that of communicative learning, which entails the identification of problematic ideas, beliefs, values, and feelings; critically assessing their underlying assumptions; testing their justification through rational discourse; and striving for decisions through consensus building. (p. 3)

The idea of transformative learning is in line with honors pedagogy. Knapp, Camarena, and Moore (2017) explained that "when intentionally directed, honors education promotes the full transformation of the student" (p. 121). However, some aspects of transformative learning, such as the emotional (Dirkx, 2006) or spiritual (Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006), may not be in the comfort zone of honors educators. Nevertheless, as Tisdell and Tolliver (2011) explained, "for learning to be truly transformative, it must engage one's whole being. . . . It has to get into our hearts, souls, and bodies and into our interactions with others in the world" (p. 93). If honors educators are going to risk guiding the honors student in questioning deeply held values and ideas, then they are also, willingly or not, going to engage aspects of the student beyond the cognitive, including the emotional and spiritual. Yet, even though transformative education is transformative precisely because it connects to the whole person, how often do we, as honors educators, truly invite the whole student to join us in the classroom? We may tacitly acknowledge that the students we teach are more than simple cognitive beings, but we often do not truly engage in the practice of providing space for the whole student to explore what is happening in the honors classroom. As the faculty who

encourage students to challenge their deeply held beliefs, we need to be also willing to risk bringing our whole selves on this journey with our students.

THE WHOLE STUDENT WALKS INTO A ROOM

Transformative learning involves the whole student, but to invite the whole of a student into a classroom is to take a risk for which we might not be prepared. The problem, though, is that whether we invite them or not, the whole student is already in our classrooms. As Schoem (2017) explained, students “bring into the classroom their hearts and spirits just as they bring their minds and intellectual capacities. . . . Students bring to the classroom their life experiences; their social and personal identities; and life’s deeper meaning, purpose, and emotions” (p. 2). Because learning really is more than an analyze-think-change process and instead is closer to see-feel-change (Brown, 2006), honors faculty need to engage the whole student in the honors classroom even though it can be a risky proposition for both educator and student. It is risky for students because we are asking them to engage in an unfamiliar way. The risk for honors educators is twofold: first, they will be introducing new ways of engaging course content; second, and likely riskier, they will have to bring their own whole person into the classroom. As Crews (2011) asked, “is it not essential for faculty members to become whole persons in order for them to be able to educate their students to become whole persons?” (p. 334). The second risk for faculty is one that each must consider and explore in an individual and unique way, but the first risk—bringing in new ways of engaging material to allow for deep questioning and exploration—is more readily accessible; it is still risky only because it is unfamiliar to the teacher, but it creates an environment that alleviates some of the risk to the honors students.

I would like to suggest one tool as a starting point for engaging the whole honors student: critical reflection. Critical reflection allows the whole student to process and explore what is taking place both in the classroom and internally. Merging critical inquiry and self-reflection, critical reflection “involves the examination of personal and professional belief systems, as well as the deliberate consideration of the ethical implications and impact of practices” (Brown, 2006, p. 720). This tool allows students to explore how what is being learned and experienced is affecting them, a process that does not come naturally or innately but must be taught (Smith, 2011). This process requires that honors faculty add the development of critical reflection skills to the content and focus of the course; as Ash and Clayton (2009) explained, “critical reflection . . . does not occur automatically—rather, it must be carefully

and intentionally designed” (p. 28). The design can take many forms (Smith, 2011), but the form it takes must be thoughtfully and intentionally integrated into the course. This kind of integration takes time, but “teaching students to think reflectively on and in their learning and experiences creates individuals who are capable of critical reflection on their environments, and new information they may receive, and their own day-to-day practices and beliefs” (Kline, St. John, & Connors, 2017, p. 232). In short, teaching critical reflection in the classroom gives students the skills to continue integrating new knowledge and experiences into who they are after they leave the classroom precisely because it allows faculty to engage the whole student, including the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual (Galura, 2017). Numerous resources explore the how of critical reflection in depth (e.g., Smith, 2011; Watson & Kenny, 2014), and honors faculty can explore these and other resources before embarking on the risky but transformative journey of engaging the whole student in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Transformative pedagogy is risky; it is difficult, it takes work, and, most importantly, it requires courage (Taylor, 2006). Since the whole student walks into our honors classroom, though, we have an obligation to interact with this whole person, not simply the intellectual person. While this approach to teaching runs counter to the traditional ivory-tower concept of higher education, it allows our students to leave our classrooms prepared to fully engage the world they encounter, including the truly difficult task of self-knowledge.

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