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Teaching as a Whole

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Abstract: Deeply ingrained in honors culture and curricula is the value of connecting with and supporting students as whole persons. This essay offers personal experiences from the perspective of a passionate educator who invests in the whole student, exploring how authentic teaching leads to rapport and belonging in the honors community and beyond. The author suggests that honors can serve the academy as an example of how investing in the complete person is mutually beneficial.

Keywords: social belonging; authentic learning; teacher-student relationships; COVID-19 pandemic—teaching and learning; Youngstown State University (OH)—Honors College

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In the essay “Teaching from the Heart,” Bhavsar calls on honors educators to lead a paradigm shift that values expression of our whole selves in our interactions with students and colleagues and that invites responses supporting or challenging this perspective. My argument is that a paradigm shift is not needed within honors because connecting with and supporting our students as whole people is already deeply ingrained in the culture of our programs and colleges. However, honors can and should serve as a leader in demonstrating the value of investing in the complete person to other areas within our institutions.

I offer some personal experiences from the perspective of a passionate educator. I also discuss how authenticity leads to rapport and a sense of belonging in students and allows us to become better academics and professionals.

IN SUPPORT OF STUDENTS

Everything about honors speaks to taking care of whole people. My university’s honors college brand—opportunity, community, family—was

determined by our students and alumni who described what honors means to them both inside and outside of the honors classroom.

In every class I teach, I openly share my own background without limiting the scope to academics. I share my prior work in industry and also my role as a mother. I invite students to feel comfortable asking me questions about either of these roles because they are all a part of me, and if my experiences can potentially help someone else, I am happy to share. By revealing our own life stories, including successes and struggles, we are relating to our students and sharing valuable insights into the world of work they will enter, regardless of their future profession. I also invite students to share their own experiences that might enhance our learning. I tell students I view us all as co-learners, and I hope to learn as much from them as they will learn from me.

One definition of rapport is having an enjoyable interaction and a personal connection (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). To make a real connection, we must first be real ourselves. Therefore, I believe authenticity is a key component to developing real relationships, building rapport, and making students feel part of the honors community.

This semester, during an honors seminar I teach, I asked the students to share a little about themselves, including why they signed up for the class. Several students indicated they had taken a previous class with me and wanted to take another. Upon reflecting on why students enjoy my classes, I have come to believe their positive experience is a result of the investment honors makes in our students. We get to know them. We listen to them. We learn from them.

Developing rapport with students can also lead to a heightened sense of belonging, which entails “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (Strayhorn, 2019).

Naturally, we want to educate students about various content areas, but research shows us that fostering a sense of belonging enhances student motivation, which can lead to academic success (Strayhorn, 2019). A lesser sense of belonging has been associated with lower levels of persistence (Gopalan & Brady, 2019).

A couple of years ago, a student in my seminar expressed that she had difficulty finding childcare for her baby that would allow her to attend a Saturday class meeting. I immediately reassured her that I understood the challenge, and I invited her to bring him to class if she was comfortable doing so. She

seemed relieved and expressed gratitude to have an alternative option. The student brought her baby to class, and the other students welcomed the presence of a child who added a lighthearted quality to the educational experience. Even students without children may have viewed this flexibility as an example of how we support each other in honors, seeing that if they ever needed help with a special situation, we would work together to find a solution.

The current pandemic demonstrates multiple ways that honors has worked to support our students as whole people. The day after our university announced that classes would go online for the remainder of the semester, the honors team considered what additional support our students might need. We spent a mid-March Saturday mapping out plans for a virtual town hall to give students an opportunity to ask questions, an email newsletter to help them navigate online learning, and a buddy system to allow them to help each other be accountable for their studies.

As the crisis progressed, we created interactive virtual events to make students feel part of the experience: a medallion ceremony in the spring for seniors and an arrival ceremony to welcome freshmen this fall. We structured these events to be as interactive as possible in virtual space. I am currently collecting data for a study on student impressions of the events and how interactive elements in virtual events affect the student experience and sense of belonging.

On a more basic level, one of the most effective tools for connecting with students during the pandemic has been asking them how they are doing. I make it a practice always to ask an open-ended question about how they are managing, even when the interaction is procedural. The act of asking a simple question often leads them to share their challenges and struggles because they were invited to do so. The act of caring, asking, and listening is another way we in honors can support the student as a whole person.

BALANCE IN OUR OWN LIVES

My identity has always been closely tied to my work, and I have never compartmentalized my roles in life. I simply engage in authentic encounters and relationship-building in all elements of my existence—visiting my children's schools, teaching students in honors, engaging with colleagues at the university, and spending time with family and friends. Who I am is determined by all the parts of me, and the sum of all of those interactions makes me whole.

The pandemic has taught me valuable lessons. One has been to let go of artificial notions such as life/work balance. Everything we engage in is life. If we are authentic individuals in every aspect, I believe we will be happier, more productive, and more peaceful people.

While I finished teaching spring classes from quarantine, it was helpful for me to disclose to my students that I was a mother at home with young kids, who were also learning remotely. Suddenly, many working parents no longer had access to childcare, and the proverbial village that helps us raise our children was now off-limits. Sharing this reality with students allowed us to embrace moments such as my getting hit in the head by a nerf dart during class as comedic rather than a source of stress. Seeing someone else's pandemic experience unfold was part of their learning.

For me, supporting students during the early days of the pandemic felt meaningful and helped me cope with the new challenges I faced. The pandemic gave me the perspective that even from my position of privilege in a household with two working parents and two healthy children, life could still feel overwhelming and out of control. I also found a deepened appreciation for the little joys in life, such as time with my children, husband, and parents. The ugly and the beautiful coexisted daily.

CONCLUSION

Whether in pandemic or normal conditions, I have always felt comfortable being my authentic self among my honors colleagues. Honors functions like a family in support of both our students and our faculty and professional staff. I believe authenticity is a key component to all relationships. Whether inside or outside of the classroom, being our true selves in our interactions with students leads to building rapport and may deepen students' sense of belonging. Being ourselves with our colleagues allows us to help each other in all the ways we may need support. By drawing on each other's strengths, we can reinvigorate ourselves to better support student growth and development. We embrace opportunities for learning inside and outside of the classroom, and we always place the whole student at our center.

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