

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors
Council –Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

2022

Question, Discover, Apply, Disseminate: My Journey from Honors Student to Educator

Heather Ness-Maddox

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournl>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Question, Discover, Apply, Disseminate: My Journey from Honors Student to Educator

HEATHER NESS-MADDOX

Middle Georgia State University, 2010–2013

Educational Psychology, doctoral candidate

Abstract: As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the author reflects on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; critical thinking; Middle Georgia State University (GA)—Honors Program

Citation: *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2022, 23(1): 85–87

My first honors course was Introduction to Psychology. I begrudgingly enrolled to fill an area. In high school, my psychology course was boring, but the honors course environment allowed me to read and critique research studies, analyzing the methods, the findings, the meaning behind the research. In high school I felt confident psychology would not be my major, but after the honors course I felt a passion for the discipline.

Taking other courses in our honors program, I was encouraged to apply course content to my interests, and my interest has always been stories, in any medium. In American Literature, I connected transcendentalism to *Star Wars*. As I took more psychology courses, I interweaved Jungian psychoanalysis with Little Red Riding Hood and principles of narrative therapy.

Our honors director encouraged me to present my work at state, regional, and eventually national honors conferences. In my honors program, I was in a continuous cycle of question, discover, apply, and disseminate. As a doctoral student, I find myself in this same cycle, honing the skills I learned from my honors experiences.

At NCHC 2012, I had the opportunity to present the work our honors program students were doing, and our honors director pointed me to works of John Dewey and introduced me to the science of pedagogy, the theory behind teaching practices. Later I would read some of these same works in an Epistemology of Learning course in my doctoral program.

During my first semester in a clinical psychology doctoral program that I would eventually leave, I started teaching part-time at my alma mater. Sitting in a neuroscience class, I designed the course material for an honors Introduction to Psychology course rather than taking notes on the lecture. If I could teach an honors course however I wanted, how would that course look? The answer was obvious. I would teach with stories.

I pitched a “Psychology of Superheroes” course and got the green light. Superhero stories drove class discussion. I assigned an Iron Man graphic novel to teach the big five personality traits. We watched an episode of *Gotham* to discuss mental disorders of Batman villains. Every semester I changed up the stories, but the concept was always the same: stories tell us something about humanity, so use stories to teach principles of human psychology.

I taught Superheroes for a few semesters and then changed the course topic to “Psychology of Video Games.” Stories within video games also illustrated psychological concepts, but now I was interested in a new pedagogical concept: gamification. Principles of game design keep players engaged and completing tasks for little or no tangible extrinsic reward. Could elements of game design also keep students engaged in their courses and completing learning tasks? As I did as an undergraduate in our honors program when I had an idea that interested me, I read journal articles on gamification, applied those concepts to my courses, and produced one of my favorite courses so far.

The last question on the final exam for Video Games offered a choice of two essay options, one of which asked students to design a video game using principles of psychology. One student, an IT major with a concentration in game design, chose both options. He wrote out his ideas on the back of his final exam. He knew answering both prompts would not boost his grade, but he described his theory-supported game because the opportunity to take what he learned in the course, apply it to his passion, and share his ideas with his teacher excited him.

When reading articles on gamification, I noticed the journals that published these articles: *Journal of Educational Psychology*; *Contemporary Educational Psychology*. I decided my next step in my academic career. I applied to an educational psychology doctoral program. I wanted to understand

research-supported teaching practices to help students question, discover, apply, and disseminate.

A passion for teaching has followed me since my undergraduate days in my honors program, just waiting for me to recognize it. How can educators best communicate content to students? How can educators light that spark of curiosity that will drive a student to find passion projects? How can educators help students apply what they already love and produce new ideas to share? And how can educators continue to do all this while the world, technology, classrooms, culture, and students evolve? I do not think researchers and educators have completely answered these questions. So, as I learned as an honors student, I continue the cycle: question, discover, apply, and disseminate.

The author may be contacted at

hness1@gsu.edu.