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Note

Honors International Faculty Learning Online (HIFLO 2020): A model for honors online professional development

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1. Introduction

The Spring of 2020 brought many disruptions to our professional and personal lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic that forced worldwide mid-semester campus closures; pivoting of traditional, face-to-face classes to remote teaching and learning; and postponements or cancellations of conferences, workshops, and other professional development events. One example of the breakdown of scheduled opportunities for us as honors colleagues to gather in-person to enhance our practices and strengthen our community was the cancellation of the 2020 International Conference on Talent Development and Honors Education in Groningen, the Netherlands, originally slated for June 10-12 but moved to June 16-18, 2021.

Immediately following the 2020 conference, we (the authors) had planned to offer the fifth Honors International Faculty Institute (HIFI), an international and highly interactive occasion for honors and talent development teachers, researchers, and leaders to engage in presentations, experiential activities, place-as-text explorations, collaborative group work, reflective exercises, and showcases designed to improve teaching, learning, and programming in honors. Suddenly, the coronavirus upended our world, and we had to reimagine the institute that we had previously organized four times alternately at Hanze University of Applied Sciences (Netherlands) and Texas Christian University (USA).

Putting aside the disappointment of the moment and recognizing the value of coming up with an alternative to HIFI that would ensure the safety and health of our honors colleagues, we decided to create a fully online version with free registration to encourage participation and create resources accessible to all members of our international community. We wanted to highlight the challenges of how all of us unexpectedly had to pivot to remote teaching and learning as the global pandemic intensified, but we also wanted to share information, experiences, and models that could open new avenues for operationalizing online honors education more generally beyond the COVID-19 crisis. We wanted, in other words, to explore how honors pedagogy could (and maybe should) be adapted to the increasingly online world of primary, secondary, and higher education. Thus, HIFLO 2020 was born! HIFLO stands for Honours International Faculty Learning Online.

2. Methods

Our planning included the idea of offering two seminars grounded in honors pedagogy research (for example: Castejón, Miñano & González, 2016; English 2016; Heijne-Penninga & Wolfensberger, 2018; Mihelich, Storrs, & Pellett, 2007; Millward, Wardman, & Rubi-Davies, 2016; Scager, Akkerman, Pilot & Wubbels, 2017; Schutte, 2017; Wolfensberger, 2012). Both seminars aimed to be very interactive and thus limited to twenty-five participants each to allow for dynamic group work, online chat room discussions, and showcasing of work.

The seminars focused on two distinctive topics: "Creating Community—Experiences from Honors" and "Remote Honors—Teaching for Deep Virtual Learning." We chose those themes because both are important in honors and difficult to realize, especially during online educational interactions. Both subjects are part of the signature honors pedagogy developed by Wolfensberger (2012), with the three pillars of "creating a committed community," "enhancing academic competence," and "offering bounded freedom.'' In the weeks after school closures because of the COVID-19 concerns, both topics were often mentioned in articles, Twitter messages, preliminary research results, and journalism reporting on the difficulties of teaching caused by the need for emergency remote instruction.

Despite the authors' experiences with online education for years (Ding & Wolfensberger, 2015; Jones & Leverenz, 2017; Massetti & Lobert-Jones, 1998; Zubizarreta, 2020a), we nevertheless also encountered educational challenges caused by the COVID-19 disruptions (see, for example, Wolfensberger & Vroom, 2020, in this issue). As chair of the National Collegiate Honors Council's (NCHC) professional development committee, Professor Jones learned how disruptive the COVID-19 pandemic could be as many colleagues clamored for useful toolkits to help them transition to remote instruction; Wolfensberger headed a research team on the educational effects of COVID-19 within Hanze UAS; and Zubizarreta collected new experiences while chairing NCHC webinars on the topic of honors during COVID-19 and participating in online forum discussions with NCHC members (Zubizarreta, 2020b). During all those experiences, various important themes and questions were discussed, and the authors made a list of possible topics for the HIFLO seminars, selecting "Creating Community" and "Deep Learning" for the first sessions.

We used the Zoom platform, enabling us to see all our participants to help preserve a sense of community, use the breakout room feature for small-group work, interact through the chat function, display shared screens of presentation slides, view selected videos, and

generate written ideas on whiteboards. One of our main objectives was to make sure participants recognized that we were not only delivering information and asking them to collaborate and present as a faculty learning community but also modeling for them the strategies and tools that we proposed as viable approaches to online honors pedagogy. Thus, we did not simply suggest the use of virtual tools for building community, developing online discussion forums, taking advantage of small-group work, tapping the power of reflection, and showcasing their learning: we actively engaged our colleagues in using the tools and practicing celebrated pedagogies of honors education in an online environment.

3. Results

HIFLO was an online opportunity for international honors educators to learn, collaborate, and exchange ideas, resources, and experiences related to remote teaching and learning. Fifty-two faculty members from 46 higher education institutions on three continents participated in the two HIFLO sessions.

Registration opened 10 days before the start of HIFLO and was closed after a week because of over-subscription. The HIFLO events were offered 17 and 22 June 2020 in the afternoon Greenwich Mean Time. Every session took 1.5 hours.

After both HIFLO events, we made the live online seminars available as public video files to all participants as well as to those who were not able to share in the real-time experiences because of limited enrollment to ensure adequate time for interactive engagement. The videos are available here:

Creating Online Community: Experiences from Honors
https://youtu.be/ikpbSrVUZnA.

Remote Honors: Teaching for Deep Virtual Learning
https://youtu.be/MI40cuh-ZxM.

We also put supplementary materials—such as the presentation slide decks, handouts, selected articles, sample assignments, lists of reading resources and web sites, and more—in an open, editable Google Drive folder so that our colleagues can benefit from sharing additional tips and insights that they are free to add to the documents. The link to the Google Drive folder can be found in the videos.

Was HIFLO 2020 successful? We will let some of the participants' feedback speak for itself:

- I enjoyed building community with you today.
- Thank you SO much for the HIFLO events you organized so brilliantly! Indeed, I may say that I have learnt a lot of new teaching and learning methods. And, most importantly, HIFLO meetings contributed to creating new ties in our honors community, thus making it stronger. Thank you very much again!
- Thank you so much for all the time and effort you put into that learning experience for us. It was great to be connected. That was great. I'm going to run with the idea our group had – I'm energized about it! I'll keep you posted!

- Thank you for a very engaging and stimulating conversation today. It was so nice to think about pedagogy when not in the middle of the semester. I found it quite liberating and I felt more willing to experiment with more distance between me and the classroom, which I had not expected. I hope the summer faculty institute can resume in person next summer and that I can be part of it one of these years!
- Thank you for generously sharing your expertise, experience, and resources!
- Wonderful to learn from and with everyone today!

In addition to such feedback, we distributed post-seminar surveys to gather useful suggestions for improving future virtual professional development opportunities.

4. Discussion

The challenges we encountered organizing and delivering HIFLO were probably no different than those encountered by all of us faced with the sudden disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitating a shift to remote teaching and learning. For some faculty unfamiliar with or resistant to online instruction, the shift required seismic changes to how we traditionally have created community, prepared for and managed our classes, assessed student learning, and other dimensions of our work. To be sure, we learned some important lessons in providing an online professional development opportunity for an international audience of honors educators. The first seven points are about the preparation of the online professional development sessions.

1. Consider carefully the issue of different time zones. We selected an hour that we felt was the best compromise possible, given that our participants spanned seventeen time zones. For example, one of our participants logged in at 4 a.m. her time, while another logged in at 9 p.m., a considerable challenge for both.

2. Another lesson related to time is that, despite our meticulous planning for a 1.5 hour session, with many concessions to give up content we felt was important, we still wished we had more time to allow for more open discussion and more attention to group work and reflection. "Had we but world enough and time," laments the English poet Andrew Marvell in a different context, but the sentiment rings true when planning for a fast-paced, dynamic event such as HIFLO. There's never enough time.

3. It took time for the authors/facilitator to reach for a shared vision concerning our HIFLO online sessions. For instance, we had several conversations about whether to livestream the HIFLO events or not. Although serving all subscribers is appealing, the teaching and learning dynamics of a livestream event versus a "closed seminar" are markedly different. We decided not to livestream but to make both HIFLO seminars public afterward on YouTube. Such a decision has consequences for the organization and delivery of the seminar; for instance, we were unable to record all the different Zoom breakout sessions, so they are not available on the video, even though we wanted to share the full experience of the seminar with the YouTube viewers.

4. Preparing two HIFLO seminars of 1.5 hours each took us at least three fairly busy days for each session, not to mention the time each of us spent preparing and revising our plans before and after our virtual meetings. Such intensive investment of time mirrors many teachers' experience that teaching and learning online require

considerable amounts of time; some teachers may even say that the safety measures prompted by COVID-19 and the connected call for online teaching doubled their working time.

Practicing the various activities we had scheduled was also crucial, alerting us to technical glitches, delays, and other problems we could troubleshoot before the live sessions. Such trial runs allowed us to make changes in our plans for maximum success.

5. We used the Zoom platform for the virtual meeting, but not all participants were familiar with the technology. Sharing clear instructions on whatever virtual meeting system is used is essential for a seamless, successful seminar. We developed our own brief instructional document, but we also pointed our members to a useful and thorough primer available from the Harvard Business School (https://s3.amazonaws.com/he-product-images/docs/Best+Practices+for+Teaching+Virtually+on+Zoom+v+2.0.pdf).

6. In addition to sharing guidelines for using the selected virtual meeting platform, advanced notice of the various online tools to be used during the seminar helps participants be ready for the various assignments and activities. We deliberately engaged our members in using Zoom's chat functions, whiteboard, and breakout rooms, but we added other tools such as Slack and Mentimeter to model how they can be used to enhance online teaching and learning. We wanted participants to know ahead of time what applications to download and how to simultaneously use one's laptop and smartphone to enable multiple screen tasks.

7. Participants were asked to prepare themselves for the sessions by watching three short movie-clips that were co-created in a European partnership. Nine organizations committed to talent development in higher eduation created an e-library filled with tools and movies that can help teachers to spot and stimulate student talent. The movies are organized into the three pillars of honors pedagogy: creating community, enhancing academic competence, and offereing bounded freedom (Wolfensberger, 2012). All movies are available online at https://www.cotalent.eu. This kind of easy homework appeared manageable for most participants. Watching the movies created a shared experience and knowledge base at the start of each seminar, which helped to open up fruitful conversations. We also offered a reading list consisting of only open-access literature.

8. We insisted on making the seminars as interactive as possible with the use of chat functions and breakout rooms for discussion. Our plan worked quite well, but it was difficult to keep up with the chat posts while trying to keep the pace of the live presentation. Also, the breakout rooms were a highlight of both events—generating many practical ideas, strengthening community, creating a genuine environment of collaborative learning, and in one session producing inspiring showcased outcomes. But transitioning from the full group in the central meeting "room" to the various groups was tricky and took more time than anticipated. Having an expert with technological skills on our team of presenters was an invaluable asset.

9. Given the work involved in both seminars—taxing participants' attention, interest, and stamina—we incorporated some physical and mindful activities midway through the seminars. The purpose of such interludes was to remind our colleagues that both community and deep learning are enhanced through kinesthetic exercise and restful moments for calm reflection. Judging from the many relaxed smiles during the activities, we believe our lesson was successful. However, looking back, we think that some extra time to invite participants to take a short break—for instance, to drink some water—would have been an additional good idea.

10. Since the focus of our first seminar was on the value of community, a feature of honors pedagogy that also played a role in the deep-learning topic of our second seminar, we politely asked all members to enable their device's camera so that all our participants could enjoy seeing each other and benefit from connecting a name and a face, a not-so-small encouragement to maintain relationships after the seminar perhaps at future honors conferences. Instead of lingering on a dominant slide on the screen, we would quickly switch to viewing all our participants to continue fostering a sense of community, even if only virtual.

11. A final lesson that is supremely important is making sure to incorporate opportunities for critical reflection, allowing participants to think about not just what they have learned in the seminar but how and why they will synthesize and apply new ideas, strategies, and tools to enhance honors teaching and learning, whether in face-to-face, real-time interactions or online. We encouraged such reflection in both sessions through the use of the available chat, breakout rooms, polling, whiteboard, mentimeter, and open discussion functions in the Zoom platform, inviting our members to think, write, and share as they reflected on the various topics we discussed in real time. After the seminars, we urged participants to join Slack and contribute to the Google Drive folder as a way of sustaining our reflective and collaborative faculty learning community. As presenters, we, too, engaged in critical reflection after each seminar to share what we learned from the experience and how to improve our work.

5. Conclusions

By reporting on the process of creating our Honors International Faculty Learning Online (HIFLO), we aim to inspire others to engage in similar endeavors. We hope that we will be able to enjoy a safer and healthier world in the coming months, enabling us to reprise the very successful personal opportunity of our Honors International Faculty Institute (HIFI) events. We are looking forward to following the projected 2021 conference in Groningen with a fifth exciting HIFI, and we would be very pleased to welcome an enthusiastic, creative small group of dedicated honors friends to our next occasion to learn together. But if circumstances prevent our meeting, perhaps HIFLO will reappear to help us sustain our valued community and keep us teaching and learning for excellence, whether personally or virtually.

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