

Note

Introduction to the JEHC volume 7, nr. 1 (2024) issue

Rebecca C. Bott-Knutson¹ and Marca Wolfensberger^{2*}

1. Member Editorial Board, South Dakota State University, United States of America, Rebecca.Bott@sdstate.edu
2. Member Editorial Board, Avans University of Applied Science, Netherlands; Mvc.wolfensberger@avans.nl

*Correspondence: Mvc.wolfensberger@avans.nl

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1. Introduction

Honors education is dynamic and evolving. The contributions to the current issue showcase recent efforts in honors education, supporting student development, and elucidate the similarities and differences in educational approaches within regular and honors courses. Themes of innovation, transdisciplinarity, connectedness are present throughout the issue. Additionally, emphasis on the role of the student in the design and responsibility of their education is explored.

2. Contributions received for the current issue

We open this issue with a qualitative study from University College Copenhagen. The authors set out to determine the primary criteria that attract students to honors programs. They reviewed applications from students in their two highest enrolled honors programs – nursing and teaching. The prevailing criteria across both groups aligned with four categories of drivers: personal goals, self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perception of the honors curriculum. While some differences exist between the two cohorts of students, the paper provides helpful insight into why students are attracted to honors.

Student autonomy has been heralded as a pedagogical approach to increase student motivation, self-efficacy, and ownership in their education. The next contribution interviewed teachers from multiple colleges and universities in The Netherlands who embodied autonomy-

supportive teacher behaviors within their honors curriculum. Consideration of the interview content provides educators with insight into choices regarding educational design, teacher behaviors, and teaching styles which enhance student-autonomy in their teaching practice. The article concludes with an infographic that clearly summarizes the most important results. The third article is a collaborative approach to design interventions to develop student capacities in self-efficacy, optimism, inquiry mindedness, and self-regulation. These capacities are thought to contribute to student wellbeing, which, in turn, supports student success. Students were engaged in focus groups to think about how these capacities could best be supported in the curriculum. The paper includes a map of recommended design principles to address each wellbeing criteria.

An honors professor from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa developed an online pedagogy built upon the cultural wisdom of the islands of Hawaii and Ireland. Built upon the Kuma's belief that "teaching is a curated act of co-creation", students were engaged in multiple interactive experiences, including the production of a blog. Collectively, the experiences nurture bridging, connection, and transformation.

Colleagues from Utrecht University and the European Honors Council partnered to investigate the role of honors instructors as cultivators of innovation. Eleven case studies were examined and instructors associated with those cases interviewed. Integration of honors education was moderately to very successful in stimulating innovation within regular education. Instructors further reflected upon the innovations in regular education spaces to be fairly successful as well as sustainable. All eleven instructors credited their experience with honors education as the source of inspiration to extend innovative activities within their regular education courses. This piece adds much needed evidence to long standing claims that experience teaching in honors can and does translate to richer experiences beyond honors.

The sixth contribution represents a robust collaboration between 11 educators, each from a different university in Europe. The team made a strong case for the need for training transdisciplinary approaches to address grand challenges. While STEM subjects are often central to the grand challenges, greater applications of integrated disciplinary approaches are necessary for progress. The efforts described within span four years from initial front runner interviews with policy partners from five countries to focus groups with policy makers, intensive laboratory trials at three sites, and data collection. The team utilized a design-based research approach, complete with iterative cycles and reflections. Front runner interviews with policy partners exposed the challenges that higher education has faced. Three rounds of focus groups with policy makers informed the study. The first of those rounds resulted in a commitment to including students in the conversations and design process. The second and third rounds targeted discussion on transdisciplinary education and outcomes from the transdisciplinary innovation labs which are presented within the manuscript. This contribution is a must-read for higher education professionals engaged in the innovation of transdisciplinary learning experiences.

The seventh, and final full-paper contribution to the current issue was submitted by a team of educators from The Netherlands. The team interviewed Dutch educators who have experience teaching in both regular and honors classes to determine similarities and differences in the approaches to both, particularly in supporting student autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In both educational formats, teachers supported learning by providing structure, clear expectations, and giving students responsibility in their own education. One difference was the extent of responsibility asked of the students, with honors students being expected to take full responsibility for their learning. Teaching behaviors also differed in the degree of autonomy versus structure provided. Students in regular classes were often provided with stepwise instructions on processes while honors students were presented with greater variety and were given more autonomy in achieving an outcome.

This current issue also included a note about a biomedical project course offered to young scientists through a partnership between the University of Munster, the University Hospital Essen and a grammar school in Germany – a partnership of five. A retrospective survey was completed by 15 student participants. Students responded favorably to the research experience. Most indicated that the experience met their expectations, the project courses like this are useful in their schooling, and that they were excited by the opportunity to participate in biomedical research.

Acknowledgements

The current issue consists of contribution after an open call. The Editorial Board would like to all authors for their work. Some of the contributions are fine examples of the connections between honors education and transdisciplinary learning trajectories. We foresee more of those examples will be published. Addressing complex societal and sustainable issues requires building bridges between education, science and society as well as crossing disciplinary boundaries. Addressing grand challenges requires professionals capable of understanding different perspectives and able to attitude shifts. Participating in honors education or engaging in transdisciplinary courses may learn students the new skills needed now and in the future.