

# Meeting the Aims of Honors in the Online Environment

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In 1998, the Boyer Commission called for using more innovative methods of course delivery, moving away from the traditional lecture toward inquiry-based learning. The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) has long held that undergraduate honors education is one arena where pedagogical innovation takes place. Members of the honors community note that what makes honors unique is that honors courses serve as laboratories of curricular innovation and experiential learning (Braid, “Cultivating”; Braid, “Majoring; Bruce; Hutgett; Lacey; Schuman, “Cultivating”; Strikwerda; Werth; Wolfensberger, van Eijl, & Pilot). Exemplary honors courses should include participatory learning, an emphasis on primary sources, interdisciplinary and experiential themes, and content that “thrive[s] at the cutting edge of curricular experimentation” (Schuman, *Beginning* 36). Online honors courses can meet all these aims of honors education.

Although the honors community is united in its focus on innovation, it is divided on how or if technology fits into the experiential and inquiry-based features of honors courses (Albert & Bruce; Braid, “Cultivating”; Carnicorn, Harris, et al.; Clark & Crockett; Cobane; Doherty; Fuiks & Clark; Gresham, Bowles, et al.; NCHC; Otero; Schuman, “Cultivating”; Schuman, *Beginning*; Schlenker; Spurrier). Although a small body of descriptive work has emerged on the values of technology in the honors classroom, little research has been conducted in this area.

While little data-based research is available on the use of technology in the honors classroom, data on the nature of online honors courses are even rarer. In undergraduate education generally, enrollment in online courses has been increasing annually, outpacing enrollment in traditional, face-to-face environments. During fall 2011, more than 6.7 million students took at least one online course, an increase of 570,000 students since the previous year (Allen & Seaman). Negative views about online learning in honors have been noted recently by Doherty in 2010 and Gresham et al. in 2012, and I have personally observed such negativity at the NCHC annual conferences, in the association newsletters, and on the unofficial email listserv. Many in the honors community believe that online learning is tied to for-profit education even

though Allen and Seaman note that, even in 2002, more than 90% of public institutions were offering online courses, if not fully online programs. Nevertheless, honors faculty and administrators believe that the aims of honors education cannot be met in an online environment.

## **STUDY PURPOSE AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The purpose of this study was to determine how online courses might meet the aims of undergraduate honors education from the perspective of the instructors teaching them. Based in my larger dissertation study on the phenomenon of online honors courses, this study followed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (van Manen) with a focus on the “historical meanings of experience and their developmental and cumulative effects on individual and social levels” (Lavery 15).

In 1990, van Manen provided the following considerations for conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological study:

- Select a phenomenon which seriously interests you and commits you to the world;
- Investigate the experience as we live it rather than how we conceptualize it;
- Reflect on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
- Describe the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
- Maintain a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; and
- Balance the research context by considering parts and whole. (30–31)

This research study follows the hermeneutic phenomenological framework through its development of a research purpose and question centered on meeting the aims of honors education through online learning. The data collection methods included a series of interactive interviews in which the researcher allowed the participants to share openly their experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas). The historical meaning behind the phenomenon was highlighted throughout the interviews. A focus on the writing, reflecting, thinking, and rewriting, followed by re-reflecting, and re-thinking (van Manen), followed in the hermeneutical tradition.

## **METHOD**

Following approval from the Institutional Review Board, I recruited participants via the email listserv affiliated with the National Collegiate Honors

Council. The minimum criterion for participants was experience teaching an online honors course for at least one semester. The participants also had to have designed their online course. As online honors courses are rare and somewhat controversial within the field, finding participants was difficult. Only five instructors who met the study criteria were willing to participate. However, the sample size has a different meaning in qualitative rather than quantitative research. As Patton notes,

[T]here are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources. (244)

He continues to say that “the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than the sample size” (245). Given the uniqueness of my study topic as well as the difficulty of identifying participants who met the study criteria, five participants seemed adequate (Lincoln & Guba; Patton).

In the following brief descriptions of each participant in the study, pseudonyms have replaced real names.

Harvey currently serves as a professor and administrator at a primarily associate's-level institution in a rural area. He has served at this institution for almost two decades and teaches interdisciplinary courses in the humanities. He has taught for the honors program since the late 1990's. Harvey taught one online honors course in the humanities during a recent summer term although he has taught non-honors courses online for more than a decade.

Patrick is a doctoral student in education at a research university with high research activity. His background is in secondary education and non-profit work. He has taught a blended course in educational technology open to all students for the past three years. He has taught for the honors program for two years, including his online course that focuses on developing twenty-first-century skills using a real-time strategy game as the learning environment and a one-credit, face-to-face literature course.

Alma is an emerita professor at a research university with high research activity. Her background is in economics and women's studies, and her current online honors course focuses on that topic. She has taught for the honors college for more than a decade. Prior to teaching a course in economics and women's studies, she taught a face-to-face research methods course for the honors college.

Mark is a faculty member for the virtual campus of a baccalaureate/associate's college. His background is in the humanities although he has a

doctorate in educational technology. After teaching secondary-level English for fifteen years, he transitioned to his current institution where he currently teaches humanities and philosophy courses primarily online. He has designed and taught online courses for several institutions. Because his institution is a virtual campus, his exposure to the honors college has been limited to those students who take his online courses through an honors contract system. He is currently teaching a course in non-western humanities that includes several honors students on contract.

Vicky is an emerita professor at an associate's-level institution in an urban area. She has taught at this institution for her entire career in higher education and has extensive experience serving as an instructor and former administrator for the honors program. She teaches interdisciplinary humanities courses as well as faculty development, and she has participated in college governance and assessment areas. She started teaching non-honors courses online before teaching her current honors humanities course online.

Each of these instructors participated in three individual, semi-structured interviews as recommended for phenomenological studies by Seidman. Each interview focused on a particular aspect of teaching an online honors course, including course design, teaching, and reflection. As participants were from various parts of the country, all interviews took place by phone. Interview data were analyzed according to van Manen's hermeneutical phenomenology approach in concert with Creswell's process for analyzing qualitative data.

For this particular study, van Manen's thematic approach was used to "elaborate on an essential aspect of the phenomenon under study" (168). Creswell's approach included coding and organizing data into meaningful units, formulating data into themes, and transforming themes into a descriptive narrative. Rigor for this study, as defined by Lincoln & Guba, was demonstrated through the use of member checking, thick description, an audit trail, and reflexivity.

## RESULTS

The themes that emerged in this study spoke to the underlying issues, concerns, and recommendations the participants shared about teaching an honors course online. The results from the thematic approach included meeting the aims of honors online as well as suggestions for implementing online learning in honors. For an in-depth description of the participants' teaching experiences and descriptions as well as other themes that emerged from the data, see Johnson.

## MEETING THE AIMS OF HONORS ONLINE

Participants had varying opinions on whether their courses met the aims of honors education. All of the participants agreed that their courses featured the small class size, deep engagement, and innovative pedagogies that are necessary characteristics of honors courses, and they had additional criteria that they felt were important to honors education. Harvey's courses included peer review, and he expected a high level of scholarship and critical thinking. Patrick thought that an experiential approach was essential to an honors course as well as having a one-on-one relationship with the instructor. Alma thought honors courses needed to be interdisciplinary and research-oriented. Vicky focused on application and synthesis.

Harvey expressed the strongest negative opinions about online honors courses. "From my honors students I expect self-motivation. I expect a lot of ability to do independent work. I expect preparation. I expect a deeper level of discussion. And I just didn't get that from my online class." His experience teaching online led him to believe that online was not necessarily a good environment for honors students. He liked the idea of being able to see a response in his students' faces, seeing if they understood the material. He did think a hybrid course environment might work "especially if you have them complete the content online, assessments online, and then come in and have a totally seminar-type discussion." Otherwise, he did not see how an online honors course might work.

Patrick also questioned whether online was the best format for his honors course.

He felt that his course was highly participatory and experiential, but he conceded that the online environment hindered engagement among peers.

It really puts sort of a damper on the social interactions, which I think should be a major part of honors education. But again, you could have a bad honors course that's in person. So I think that it's possible to facilitate richer dialogue via an online forum.

While he wondered if a face-to-face or hybrid course might work better, he believed that ultimately his course met the aims of honors education. "Honors education is all about experimenting, giving students a different perspective or allowing them to experience different things on their own. And I think the course really, really hits that."

Mark was not entirely convinced either. Although honors students had performed well in his course, he had not found their work to be outstanding as compared to some of his other students. At the same time he thought that taking online courses should be an option for honors students because "it

simply provides an alternative modality.” He thought all students needed to be savvy about being online learners and about the skills they could gain by experiencing an online course.

Vicky believed that offering only online honors courses would be a mistake even if online courses filled enough of a need for students that they should be an option. She believed that honors students flourish with the mentoring they receive in a face-to-face environment, especially considering that these students often go on to become leaders in their fields. On the other hand, online honors courses allow students to see a broader spectrum of honors education and provide greater access when schedules are restricted. She felt that online honors courses meet the aims of honors education and that they are “qualitatively as good as a face-to-face class, but it’s different.”

Finally, Alma had no qualms about offering online honors courses and continued to convince her dean that the courses were worthwhile. While she did not get to know her students as well online, she felt that she could teach the same content regardless of format. “I could do the same topic on a person-to-person basis, face-to-face or online. For me, the topic is no different.” She believed the quality of work she received from the students was the same in her online course as it had been in her face-to-face course, so she saw no reason not to endorse online honors courses.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

“Don’t do it”—Harvey.

However, each of the participants, including Harvey, shared suggestions for their colleagues interested in teaching an online honors course. Harvey recommended having a critical mass of students as well as setting aside time for synchronous communication. He wondered if having video chats available when he taught might have made a difference in the level of engagement with his students in the course. Patrick agreed that synchronous chat opportunities would be helpful, noting that Skype was one particular tool he recommended.

Alma, Vicky, Mark, and Patrick all believed that it was important to consult others as part of their planning process. As Alma suggested, “You cannot do this without training.” Vicky encouraged faculty to look to the pioneers in the area for guidance. As Mark noted, “You need to look and see what others have done online. You need to see models . . . so you don’t reinvent the wheel.” Patrick agreed: “If you take the time and put in the effort and consult the experts on it, then I think your course has a much higher chance of success, and students will appreciate that.”

Many of the participants stressed that faculty could not simply move their face-to-face course into an online environment with few modifications.

As Patrick observed, “You can’t just cut and paste.” Alma believed that training would help faculty understand this principle and better prepare their courses for the transition. She also said that faculty needed to plan far in advance for their online courses. She typically submitted her course content months in advance to the online staff. Mark agreed that faculty needed to “try to get 99% of all the work done before the course ever starts. You can’t do it on the fly.”

Vicky relied on her experiences in faculty development to provide advice on preparing to teach online. Throughout the process, she thought that instructors needed access to good faculty development and technical support. She believed that faculty interested in teaching online should start by moving some of their course materials online: “Most faculty can make that step pretty easily.” Then, they can move to a hybrid course by considering “what am I doing right now, and how is that going to work as well online?” Gradually, faculty can begin to think about moving other components online. “I think having a program that allows them to evolve naturally is better.”

At the national level, Harvey and Patrick both believed that there needed to be a compilation of best practices or examples of online honors courses. Vicky recommended a list of “ten things that successful online honors teachers do” as well as a resource page with potential online learning consultants. She also thought that a blog could be a place to share ideas, challenges, and successes among online honors instructors.

I could see that working really well to have blogs and a place where people could go and share ideas. Might be asynchronous discussion, something about honors education, and get some feedback or connect with somebody that knew something about the subject from doing it. This would save innumerable hours.

To Vicky, developing partnerships was very important.

Mark and Vicky both had similar views about developing an online pedagogy for honors. Mark believed more research was needed about teaching in honors and the needs of honors students so that they could apply that knowledge to online pedagogy. “We need to gather more research on what distinguishes honors students and honors colleges . . . from the regular, larger population. And then design those sorts of experiences in online learning.” Vicky agreed, stating “there’s a lot of literature about best practices in online teaching and learning, but it doesn’t deal with honors.”

## DISCUSSION

Perhaps the largest barrier to online learning in undergraduate honors education is the fear that the aims of honors education will not be met in an

online environment. The National Collegiate Honors Council has provided guidelines for honors course objectives that include developing written and oral communication skills, developing the ability to analyze, synthesize, and understand scholarly work, and helping students become independent and critical thinkers. All of these outcomes can be met in an online environment, even oral communication skills. The challenge is helping honors faculty understand the links between such outcomes and the online environment.

The Community of Inquiry (COI) framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer) provides one way to address the aims of honors in an online environment. The three core elements of COI include social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Garrison, “Online Collaboration”).

## **SOCIAL PRESENCE**

Social presence involves the way students connect with each other on a personal level online. While not included specifically in NCHC’s course outcomes, many of the participants of this study noted the importance of building community among students. Harvey struggled in this area. Even with only five students, he did not feel as though they formed the type of learning community online that he typically found in his face-to-face courses. Patrick was able to form smaller communities within work groups, but in the larger class he noted a lack of social interaction among students. Alma also feared that students did not get to know each other as well online although she was willing to move past that issue due to other factors.

In an online environment, communication is structured differently; it happens less frequently but with more deliberation (Garrison, “Online Collaboration”). The beginning of the course is the ideal time to set expectations about communication and community, increasing social presence through student introductions, discussing expectations for communication in online forums, and including ways for students to see each other’s faces through pictures or synchronous communication activities (Garrison, “Online Collaboration”; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer).

The participants in my study all started strong by including an orientation to their course. Many of these orientations included a discussion forum for introductions as well as for expectations of student performance. To increase social presence, the instructors could have had students create multimedia introductions rather than text-based introductions or had students discuss course expectations in small groups. From the outset of the course, the teacher needs to set the standards for the quality of interaction, timely responses, message length, and group size (Garrison, “online Coomunity”; Tu & McIsaac).

Instructors can also increase social presence through the use of synchronous communication tools (Hrastinski, Keller, & Carlsson; Leo, Manganello, et al.; McBrien, Jones, & Cheng). Although many of the participants were hesitant to use chat or hold virtual office hours, Harvey mentioned that, if he ever taught again, he would consider adding more synchronous communication tools to help build community. Synchronous communication allows participants to be in any location but to interact in real-time through the use of text, audio, and video chat, whiteboards, and screen-sharing (Bower; Hrastinski et al.; Martin). Such tools also aid students in small group collaboration (Hrastinski et al.; Marjanovic), clarification of course content (Leo et al.), immediacy of feedback (Martin), and comfort in expressing opinions (McBrien, Jones, & Cheng).

## COGNITIVE PRESENCE

Cognitive presence is the manner in which students construct meaning through reflection and discourse (Garrison, "Online Collaboration"). Critical thinking, one of the outcomes of honors courses (NCHC) is the desired process and outcome of cognitive presence as well (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, "Critical Thinking"). Four phases of critical inquiry include triggering events, exploration, integration, and resolution (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, "Critical Thinking") and can be explored by studying messages and responses within the discussion forums.

Harvey and Mark were both concerned about the depth of critical analysis demonstrated in their online discussions. While Mark's honors students performed well in discussions, he did not find their work exemplary. Harvey was disappointed in all aspects of his students' discussions. On the other hand, Alma and Vicky both found their students' critical thinking skills to be on a par with their previous experiences teaching face-to-face.

The online environment is an ideal place for reflection, much more than the face-to-face environment where external factors can influence a student's ability to speak up (Garrison, "Online Collaboration"). The types of questions instructors pose in discussion forums should allow for more reflection and in-depth responses (Bangert; Ertmer, Sadaf, & Ertmer). Creating expectations for discussion responses as well as rubrics to evaluate them can help improve the types of responses students give (Gilbert & Dabbagh; Swan, Shen, & Hiltz). Activities need to be selected that match the various phases of critical inquiry (Garrison, "Online Collaboration") and should be meaningful and purposeful to the student (Ke, Chavez, et al.; Young & Bruce).

## TEACHING PRESENCE

The final component of the COI model involves teaching presence, or the design and facilitation of a course in a way that supports the social and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, “Critical Inquiry”). The instructor creates the opportunity for students to develop their written and oral communication skills, to interact with scholarly material, and to become critical thinkers. Shea found that instructors who exhibited stronger behaviors in this area—including instructional design, course organization, and directed facilitation—were able to create a stronger sense of community in their courses.

All of the study participants except Harvey used either an instructional-design approach or worked with an instructional designer to plan their courses. Alma’s and Vicky’s classes in particular were exemplary models of organization and facilitation. That their courses were the two with the highest success rates in meeting the aims of honors education is not surprising given the time and effort they put into planning and teaching their course.

The discussion forum is one of the most evident displays of teacher presence, and instructors have the opportunity to define their role as facilitator in this area (DeNoyelles; Shea, Vickers, & Hayes). Too much involvement in discussion might stifle students while too little involvement might turn students off (Garrison, “Online Collaboration”; Shea). Teacher presence can be exhibited outside the realm of discussion through a focus on assignment feedback and opportunities to communicate with the instructor (Shea, Vickers, & Hayes).

In addition, students can develop their own forms of teacher presence if the instructor allows them to take leadership roles within the online environment (Shea, Vickers, & Hayes). Such an opportunity sounds ideal for honors students who enjoy taking leadership roles in the classroom. Mark had the opportunity through his honors contract requirements to set more formal expectations of students taking a leadership role. Unless the teacher sets such expectations, students might not know what they should be aiming for, especially in the midst of competing obligations. If Mark had delineated the kind of specific roles for his online honors students that he was developing for his face-to-face honors course, he might have been more satisfied with their performance in taking leadership roles in the class.

Within the Community of Inquiry framework, Harvey was resistant to seeking assistance in designing and teaching his course. Relying solely on his previous experiences teaching online, he faced alone the burden of converting his honors course to an online environment. An instructional designer might have (1) provided valuable guidance in crafting discussion questions and other assessments that led to critical inquiry, (2) helped solve the problem

that the small class size hindered social bonds among students could form, and (3) suggested ways to improve the quality of individual projects that his students were submitting.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Four of the study participants provided their take on the impact of adopting or failing to adopt online learning within honors. Although their online teaching experiences varied, most of the participants recognized the potential for online learning in honors. Vicky thought it would be a “negative implication for honors to turn its back on online education.” Alma agreed that “it’s the future.” She believed that honors would have to provide more online courses eventually.

Patrick reiterated that “honors education is supposedly such a free and open-to-experimentation program . . . ; instead of . . . automatically dismissing it as inferior, maybe more work needs to be done to see how you can improve it.” He cautioned that “if honors education refuses to at least address some of these issues, then they risk being left behind.” He worried that honors might become irrelevant if it did not cater to the needs of its students.

Mark also argued that honors educators could not “bury our heads in the sand and just ignore it, and it will go away.” He believed that online education in honors could be “made a very enriching experience.” He acknowledged that faculty would have to relinquish some of their authority and become more of a guide, but those changes could be exciting. As Patrick concluded, “you’ve got the opportunity to change on your terms.”

Currently there is limited research on undergraduate honors education as it relates to pedagogy and technology. This study, as well as the larger study from which it was derived (Johnson), was designed to explore online honors courses from the perspectives of the instructors. A variety of related qualitative studies could be conducted on, for instance, the perspectives of honors administrators who serve as gatekeepers to online course adoption, faculty at the other end of the adoption curve, and students who have taken these courses. Quantitatively, this topic could be explored through a content analysis of online discussion forums, surveys of students and faculty about their experiences with online learning, and studies of social, cognitive, and teaching presence using the Community of Inquiry model. Finally, studies could be conducted on the design and development of online or hybrid course options for honors.

One of the important recommendations for the honors community is that, as many of the participants stated, teachers need access to resources ranging from examples of online or hybrid honors courses to experienced instructors who can serve as mentors and support. While some early adopters may find

it easier to experiment and troubleshoot problems on their own without access to examples or mentors, most honors faculty will need much more guidance if they are going to adopt online learning.

At the national level, the NCHC should create resources for honors faculty. Two excellent models already exist: the University of Central Florida's Teaching Online Pedagogical Repository (TOPR) and the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE). TOPR is a public wiki in beta release where instructors contribute pedagogical practices, including actual artifacts from online and hybrid courses (Thompson & Chen). Current contributions include methods of social interaction, discussion prompts, assessments, and presentation of course content. The site is guided by an editorial board and will include a formal submission and review process once it is in full release.

NITLE is a national network of liberal arts colleges and universities originally founded to help integrate technology use into teaching and learning at those institutions. NITLE provides consulting services to help liberal arts institutions plan strategically for technology decisions related to teaching and learning. NITLE Labs has created an Innovation Studio in concert with their symposium for participants to tackle challenges, develop solutions, and build models related to issues in liberal education. Participants are guided by mentors throughout the process. In addition NITLE provides listservs focused on a variety of technology topics as applied to liberal arts disciplines and case studies on effective models and practices.

### CONCLUSION

Change is always difficult, though, when the majority is not ready for it. Prior personal experience and the experiences of several of this study's participants, as well as evidence from national conferences, association newsletters, and the listserv, have shown that the honors community at the national level still feels strong opposition to online learning. In some instructors' eyes, innovation in honors education remains a product of the face-to-face classroom environment, not to be disrupted by something that for-profits do (Carnicorn, 52), but the face-to-face classroom does not hold an exclusive grasp on the market of creativity, critical thinking, and communication. Online learning proponents, with the backing of evidence-based research, must begin advocating more loudly and clearly to demonstrate their place at the table of honors education.

As many of this study's participants stated, the honors community's unwillingness to acknowledge and incorporate online learning would be a long-term detriment as students looked elsewhere to meet their academic needs. Online learning increases access for students and openness to

experimentation, and, with its proponents providing support through examples and experienced faculty, it should soon make further inroads within the undergraduate honors community.

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