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"Breaking Barriers in Teaching and Learning" - Foreword

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FOREWORD

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When I first stumbled upon honors education over two decades ago while team-teaching a seminar called “Poetry and the Condition of Music,” it was the freedom inside and outside the classroom that most caught my attention. Sprung from the shackles of my usual British Literature survey, one in which students trudged through a rigid chronology of canonical authors, I was free to design a course with the university’s choral director that put ancient oral poets in dialogue with rap musicians; that explored the collaboration between W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten; that set Langston Hughes against crucial jazz influences. Additionally, as someone who was (and is!) deeply resistant to authority in any form, I loved the idea of turning over control of a classroom discussion to students: doing so with a partner in team-teaching arrangements encouraged us to step off the teaching stage and clear space for the talented undergraduates in the seminar.

While I had learned an immense amount in graduate school and was often mentored by deeply caring professors, I also found many of those learning spaces propped up by what bell hooks refers to as “the unjust exercise of power” (5). It was clear who was in charge in those classrooms, and most graduate students quickly discovered that the clearest route to success traveled through submitting to longstanding hierarchies. Virtually all conversations were routed through our professors rather than peer to peer; when we did find ourselves leading our own undergraduate classes, we tended to mimic that teacher-centric behavior. As Michel Foucault has shown, traditional education like this can be understood as a process of training that uses practices like hierarchical observation, normalizing judgments, and disciplining examination to reinforce power relations between teacher and student, between subject and

object (170–94). The power imbedded in such relationships is so seductive, in fact, that even after escaping such subjugation, the previous targets of power tend to mimic those hierarchies with themselves installed as masters, a depressing irony observed by Paolo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

One of the crucial moves of honors education over the past few decades has been to attack such hierarchies from within, to place students at the center of a project that turns ownership of the learning process over to learners and out of the hands of teachers. In Freirean terms, this means allowing students to “participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation” (48). This current volume is explicitly asking—through its title and contents—what such a transformation looks like, and it provides expert guidance to those animated by practices that lead down this exciting path. *Breaking Barriers in Teaching and Learning* thus paints a picture of honors education as innovative, student-centered, and progressive, filled with “liberatory practice[s]” (59), to cite hooks’s rich phrase, that ultimately live up to her call for the classroom to be “the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (12). These essays demonstrate how honors teaching and learning can be truly transformative and why that matters in this day and age of outrageous public misrepresentations of what actually happens in our most progressive and engaged college classrooms.

It is remarkable, too, that the act of putting learners in charge of their learning is still a transgressive act. Always a deeply conservative institution, higher education is still dominated by teacher-centered strategies that tend to emphasize “right” answer type thinking among students. Thankfully, genuine honors education has always been about focusing on the process of learning in the belief that such an orientation will actually lead to better outcomes on the product side.

While honors has also often led the way in higher education, we are perhaps not the best marketers of our merchandise. For example, today’s much ballyhooed high-impact practices—learner-centered classroom environments, experiential learning, interdisciplinary curriculums, place-based learning, and metacognitive assignments,

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to name just a few—have been central to honors for more than half a century, though that genealogy is rarely highlighted. In some respects, a volume like this shows that the honors community is engaging and must engage in the hard work of advocating for the importance of what we do.

Works Cited

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