

About Offering Freedom

Wolfensberger (2012) formulated, based on her research, *three pillars of Honors Pedagogy*: creating a community, enhancing academic competence, and offering bounded freedom. This document concentrates on the third pillar 'offering bounded freedom', concerning teaching strategies "that give students space for experimentation, risk-taking, personal initiatives, and pursuit of their interests" (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 23).

VanTassel-Baska and Stambaugh (2005) underline the importance of a flexible curriculum and offering students a choice and options, for example in assignments, to adjust to the unique needs of gifted students. The literature indicates that honors students prefer more autonomy than their peers in regular programs (Marra & Palmer, 2004). Autonomy is the subjective experience of psychological freedom of choice while performing activities (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). In her research synthesis in 2007, one of the lessons Rogers puts forward is that gifted students should be provided with opportunities to work independently. Compared to regular students, these students are more likely to prefer independent study and self-instructional materials (Rogers, 2007). An autonomy-supportive teaching style is therefore of increased importance in honors education.

Reeve (2009) defines the autonomy-supportive teaching style as "*Interpersonal sentiment and behavior teachers provide during instruction to identify, nurture, and develop students' inner motivational resources*" (p.160). According to Reeve, the following conditions enable such a teaching style: adopting students' perspectives; welcoming students' thoughts, feelings and actions, and supporting students' motivational development and capacity for autonomous self-regulation. Additionally, teachers need to accomplish three tasks. The first task is to become less controlling. For this, teachers need insight into how their motivational style is influenced by various forces and how it affects students. The second task is to support autonomy. For this, it is important that the teacher knows the benefits and positive influences this teaching style can have on students and on their own performance and feelings. The third task is to learn the "how to" of autonomy support. This includes expanding one's teaching repertoire with instructional behaviors, such as nurturing the inner motivational resources of students and relying on non-controlling and informational language. Additionally, teachers can provide explanatory rationales and display patience to show that there is time for self-paced learning (Reeve, 2009).

Importance of 'Offering Freedom' in honors education

Autonomy supportive teaching behaviours are positively related to students' classroom functioning, engagement, and performance (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Supporting autonomy in learning combined with offering structure, for example by formulating clear expectations (Vansteenkiste et al., 2012), is the key to the development of intrinsic motivation of students (Kusurkar, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and to study success (Lerma & Kreinovich, 2016). When teachers support their students in regulating their study activities such that they experience autonomy, students' intrinsic motivation and learning will improve (Vansteenkiste et al. 2009). In contrast, giving students too much or too little autonomy will result in sub-optimal learning processes. The subjective aspect of the need for autonomy implies that the ideal degree and form of support may vary for individual students (cf. Vermunt & Verloop, 1999).

Teachers themselves also benefit from experiencing autonomous motivation for teaching. Autonomously motivated teachers experience a stronger sense of personal accomplishment from

teaching and less emotional exhaustion (Roth, et al., 2007). Complementary to this, they often also experience greater vocational satisfaction and psychological well-being (Reeve, 2009).

Teaching behaviors that contribute to ‘Offering freedom’

The research of Wolfensberger (2012) resulted in three clusters of teaching strategies that can foster the offering of freedom:

- Strategies that create space for students’ questions, choices, and initiatives’ scaffolding.
- Strategies that foster the sense and excitement of experimentation.
- Strategies that treat honors students as ‘junior colleagues’ in research and education (activities).

Based on the literature search and the research of Wolfensberger (2012), several teaching behaviors were formulated, listed in Table 1.

“While many methods are advocated, several stand out in this regard: student-initiated learning, ability-peer tutoring, guided dialogue and reflection leading to metacognition (Freeman, 1999; VanTassel-Baska, 2002)” (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 33). Offering freedom is about tuning in to students’ personal interest, granting responsibility, and teaching students to make their own decisions (Wolfensberger, 2012).

Table 1: Teaching behaviors which foster offering freedom

Allowing students to experiment
Challenging students
Offering students trust and guidance
Stimulating students to take responsibility for their own development
Referring students to experts when their questions or interests are beyond the teacher’s area of expertise
Granting students adequate levels of responsibility
Giving students new ideas
Giving students constructive suggestions and leaving it up to the students to use them
Supporting students’ self-regulation in learning
Giving students feedback as if they are a junior colleague
Giving students freedom in time management
Giving students freedom to choose their own topics
Using honors as an educational innovation room and experimenting with different education methods and tests
Having fun with the students
Being demanding

In a recent study, honors teachers in America and in The Netherlands were asked to indicate whether they perceive these behavioral aspects to be essential for teaching in honors. The greatest consensus was found for “Allowing students to experiment”, “Challenging students”, and “Offering students trust and guidance” (Heijne-Penninga et al, in preparation). In the interviews Wolfensberger conducted, “most examples of offering freedom also include strategies to create community or ways to enhance academic competence” (Wolfensberger, 2012, p.117). That is also seen here: ‘Challenging students’ and ‘Offering students trust and guidance’ overlap with teaching behaviours described respectively in ‘Enhancing academic competence’ and ‘Creating a community’.

Allowing students to experiment

Experimental education has been prominently featured in honors education programs for decades (Holman et al., 2009). Folds-Bennet & Twomey (2013) indicate that students should be provided with experiences through which they deeply engage with ideas and content so that both their analytical abilities and core beliefs and values are transformed. Previously, Dewey (1938) already indicated that educators should help students and be their facilitator. In that way, educators connect the students' learning to their experiences, and aid them in both group social development and individual judgement development, and the exercising of such development (see Holman et al., 2009).

Using open assignments can support and challenge students to experiment and try something new. When implementing such an assignment, it is important that the teacher asks questions and stimulates the students to think about their experiences and what they have learned, thus connecting learning to students' experiences as Dewey (1938) formulated it. *Offering students trust and guidance* (the number three teaching strategy in Table 1), appears essential for this. Wintrol and Jerink (2013) described that honors students "...would love to try something new but are too afraid to do so. They grow terrified when pushed out of their comfort zones and faced with new challenges that might threaten their GPAs and hopes of medical or law school" (p.47). A head librarian at an American high school mentions in an edwebinar (<https://home.edweb.net/ru-ready-2-trust-em-access-essential-developing-citizenship-among-millennials/>) that students often create incredible projects that are possible only when teachers give them "the freedom to think and act independently".

Challenging Students

Challenging students is closely related with the second pillar of honors pedagogy: enhancing academic competence (Wolfensberger, 2012). The teaching strategy *Setting challenging tasks and assignments* was seen as an essential strategy for teaching in honors and is linked with enhancing academic competence.

In 'about enhancing academic competence' you can read the following on challenging students: *"Students often indicate that a lack of challenge is caused by slow pace, too much repetition of already mastered information, inability to move on after mastering the regular curriculum, few opportunities to study topics of personal interest, and an emphasis on the mastery of facts rather than the use of thinking skills (Gallagher, et al., 1997; Kanevsky & Keighly, 2003; Mullet, et al., 2018).*

According to students, they experience challenges when they are given complex assignments with little structure and a lack of guidance, complemented by the ability to exert choice and control over their learning and independence. Students also indicate a desire for heavy workloads and a fast learning pace (Mullet, et al., 2018). From their teacher they expect him/her to care and have high expectations (Kanevsky and Keighly, 2003; Mullet et al., 2018; Scager, et al., 2014). Authentic learning, multidisciplinary issues, and supervisors with considerable knowledge who gave space and little support and reflection as part of the assignment all seem to be important ways to create challenging tasks and assignments (Bormans, 2015)."

Offering students trust and guidance

Trust includes one or more of the following attributes: vulnerability, benevolence in motivation, reliability, competence, honesty and openness (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000). The teacher, as the

one who trusts, has to believe that the student shares mutual goals with him/her and has the capacity to meet expectations (cf. Id-Deen, & Woodson, 2016). If teachers build relationships with students and create a trusting relationship, students' academic performance (Goddard, et al., 2001) and identification with their school improves (Mitchell, et al., 2018). Teachers trusting their students and students trusting their teachers are, together, considered to contribute to the self-regulatory climate in schools (Adams, et al., 2016).

Giving students special duties, responsibilities and giving them second chances are ways to offer students trust (Ennis & McCaulay, 2002). Furthermore, teachers can create a classroom setting in which norms and expectations regarding the mutual relationship are discussed, developed, and strengthened (Brake, 2019; Ennis & McCaulay, 2002). Getting to know one's students, for example by spending one-on-one time with each of them, or by focusing on positive interactions and demonstrating understanding and patience, are teaching behaviors that contribute to a trusting relationship between students and teachers (Brake, 2019; Ennis & McCaulay, 2002).

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