

## **About Creating Community**

Wolfensberger (2012) formulated, based on her research, the *three pillars of Honors Pedagogy*: creating a community, enhancing academic competence, and offering freedom. This document concentrates on the first pillar “creating community”, concerning teaching strategies “that create rapport and connectedness between teachers and students and among students; and that create a learning community” (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 22).

Various definitions of a learning community exist. The simplest definition is put forward by Cross (1998), who defines a learning community as ‘groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning’ (Cross, 1998, pp.4). In an honors community, faculty, students, and professionals have close contact with one another and form a network in which interaction among them is fostered (Van Ginkel, et al., 2014). Such interaction has been shown to contribute to more satisfaction among student participants, reduced drop-out rates of student participants, and a perception of enhanced learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Jansen & Suhre (2015) concluded that students who perceive their honors college as a learning community benefit more from the honors track than students who hold a different view. In a similar vein, Cuevas and colleagues (2017) found that a psychological sense of community fueled honors students’ success at their institution.

Research shows that honors communities vary between educational programs in size, structure, level of activity, and interaction (Van Ginkel, et al., 2012; 2014). Moreover, the functions of a learning community can vary among different settings. The following functions were distinguished by Van Ginkel and colleagues (2014):

- 1) stimulating learning and development;
- 2) improving social contacts and well-being;
- 3) offering a place for students to meet professionals and to stimulate the organization of activities.

However, several other key and supportive factors of learning communities are addressed in the literature. This includes factors such as the importance of frequent contact between students and between the educator and students through formal, as well as informal, meetings (Brinkel et al., 2015; Cuevas et al., 2017; Van Ginkel et al., 2012), the experience of learning by doing and co-creation (Stobbe & Hogenstijn, 2017), having a shared passion for challenges and achieving excellence (Van Ginkel et al., 2012), having a feeling of belonging and a feeling that members matter to one another (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Van Ginkel et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2004), feeling shared ownership and influence over the learning experience (Brinkel et al., 2015; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Van Ginkel, 2012; Wilson et al., 2004), and ensuring infrastructural aspects such as housing for honors students and a physical location for activities (Reichert, 2007; Van Ginkel et al., 2012; Wolfensberger, 2012).

## **Importance of ‘Creating Community’ in honors education**

In a study by Kaczvinsky (2007), honors students were found to be less inclined to participate in social activities than regular freshman students. Rinn & Plucker (2004) also claim that gifted college students tend to have a preference for solitude and independence. Kaczvinsky (2007) suggested that participating specifically in an honors community might offer honors students opportunities to form social bonds and develop friendships while maintaining an intellectual challenge which might be lacking in other social communities. By working and learning in an honors community, students have the opportunity to discuss and interact with peers that are just as motivated and intellectually interested as they are themselves. The students’ academic experience can be enriched through this interaction (Rutland Gillison, 2000) and discussions can be stimulated (Robinson, 1997). Students and

teachers indicated that in particular, these interactions make honors activities valuable, and are viewed as essential components of any honors programme (Coppoolse, et al., 2013).

Furthermore, participation in learning communities results in better academic performance in terms of knowledge, skills and competence, and the integration of academic and social experiences into learning (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Van Lankveld & Volman, 2011; Tinto & Russo, 1994). Additionally, social adjustment to university life can be eased by participating in a learning community (Rutland Gillison, 2000). In this light, students' engagement (Zhao & Kuh, 2004) and well-being (Van Eijl et al., 2013) are often strengthened. Research has shown that honors students like to have formal, as well as informal, contact with educators and the community as a whole (Wolfensberger & Offringa, 2012). As mentioned above, this is often a key supportive factor in a learning community.

### Teaching behaviors that contribute to 'Creating Community'

Teachers seem to play a crucial role in facilitating the development of learning communities (Sherin, et al., 2004; Shulman & Sherin, 2004). Research by Wolfensberger (2012; Wolfensberger et al., 2014) resulted in three clusters of teaching strategies that can foster the creation of a community:

- Strategies for building an effective relationship between teachers and honors students and among honors students; such as interaction, (peer) feedback and active learning.
- Strategies and forms of teacher behavior that create a positive and supportive spirit; such as encouragement, joy and inspiration.
- Strategies and forms of teacher behavior that make the teacher part of the community in a practical and a personal sense; such as availability, interest in students and commitment.

Based on a literature search and the research of Wolfensberger (2012), several teaching behaviors were formulated, listed in Table 1 (Wolfensberger, 2012). "The general picture is that teachers encourage interactivity and active learning in honors classes. They give attention to the personal interests and needs of honors students well" (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 99).

**Table 1: Teaching behaviors to foster Creating Community**

Inspiring students
Appreciating students' questions and remarks
Creating a supportive, friendly atmosphere
Creating an atmosphere in which students learn from one another
Inviting students to participate actively
Giving useful feedback
Being interested in students as an individual
Using active teaching and learning methods
Being available and easily accessible for students
Demonstrating commitment to the honours community
Stimulating students to play an active role in society
Stimulating students to think about their personal wishes
Giving room for students' personal interests
Stimulating students to play an active role in the academic community
Stimulating students to enjoy their achievements
Understanding quickly what a student asks

In a recent study, honors teachers in America and in The Netherlands were asked to indicate whether these behavioral aspects are, in their opinion, essential for teaching in honors. Except for the last two behaviours in this table (“Stimulating students to enjoy their achievements” and “Understanding quickly what a student asks”) all behaviors were perceived as essential for honors teaching by more than 50% of the respondents. The greatest consensus was found in “Inspiring students”, “Appreciating students questions and remarks”, “Creating a supportive, friendly atmosphere” and “Creating an atmosphere in which students learn from each other”, indicating that these behavioral aspects are thought to be essential for teaching in honors (Heijne-Penninga et al, in preparation).

### *Inspiring students*

‘Inspiring students’ was seen by most of the respondents as essential behavior for teaching in honors. In the study by Wolfensberger (2012), teachers indicated that they use this strategy more in honors classes than in classes for regular students. “Teachers should be role models. Gifted learners are often inspired by figures of authority who exhibit wisdom and promote positive values of civic engagement” (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 32).

This teaching behavior ‘inspiring students’ has links with other behaviors listed in Table 1. ‘Inspiring students’ is, for example, possible by inviting students to participate actively, by being interested in the student as an individual, and by stimulating them to think about their personal wishes.

### *Appreciating students’ questions and remarks*

This strategy has to do with trusting the students and giving them confirmation that they are doing well. Talking with students and giving them feedback as if they are equals with and as important as the teacher is a way to show appreciation for what they say and do. Let students finish their remark or question, answer their questions seriously, compliment them when appropriate, and actively listening to them will show appreciation for what they said.

When using this teaching strategy students will most likely be stimulated to take more initiative and come up with their own ideas and suggestions. This behavior is also related to students’ experience of autonomy (Reeve & Jang, 2006) and thus, the motivation to actively participate will increase when appreciating students’ questions and remarks. This line of reasoning aligns with the claim that facilitating the initiatives of students is helpful in the building of a community (Van Eijl et al., 2013).

### *Creating a supportive, friendly atmosphere in which students learn from each other*

In their honors classes, teachers can help to build a community by creating a supportive, friendly atmosphere in which students learn from each other. This includes teaching behaviors such as fostering social relatedness and becoming part of the community through interest and commitment (Rutland Gillison, 2000).

Creating such an atmosphere takes time. It starts with taking the time to get to know each other and actually forming the community (Van Eijl et al., 2013), for example by starting with a special introduction meeting or a camp experience. The organization of different meetings, formal as well as informal, outside of school is also beneficial in creating this atmosphere after the initial start of the program or course (Van Eijl et al., 2013). Van Eijl and colleagues also advise to match students based

on their willingness to work together, behave as a role models for talent development, and function as a coach during the construction of a community. Being a role model is also stressed by Clapper (2010), who underlines the importance of the educator using respectful communication, being positive, and having patience for the creation of a supportive, friendly atmosphere in which students learn from each other.

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