Note

"Offering freedom" as a teaching strategy for honors students

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1. About 'Offering freedom'

Students who are able and motivated to do more than the regular curriculum offers, the honors students, call for a specific pedagogical approach by teachers (Wolfensberger, 2012). In search of this specific pedagogy Wolfensberger formulated, after literature review and interviews with experienced honors teachers, the three pillars of Honors Pedagogy. These pillars are creating a community, enhancing academic competence, and offering freedom. This note concentrates on the pillar of 'offering freedom,' concerning teaching strategies "that give students space for experimentation, risk-taking, personal initiatives and pursuit of their interests" (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 23).

To become intrinsically motivated, three psychological needs have to be met, which are autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The three pillars of honors pedagogy meet these psychological needs. Because honors students prefer autonomy to make their own choices, they appreciate an autonomy-supportive teaching style characterized by relatedness and a good balance between autonomy and structure (Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Reeve, 2009; Sierens, Vansteenkiste, Goossens, Soenens, & Dochy, 2009).

Starting from the self-determination theory, Reeve (2009) was one of the first to focus on the autonomy-supportive teaching style and defines this as a teaching style in which the teacher (1) adopts the student perspective, (2) supports the intrinsic motivation of the student and his autonomous self-regulation, and (3) is open to the thoughts, feelings, and the behavior of the student. This way, within the context of education, the basic concepts of autonomy, competence, and connectedness as seen in the self-determination theory get a didactic translation.

Teachers who use an autonomy-supportive teaching style focus on stimulating autonomous behavior. Key to it is identifying, feeding, and building up personal interests and values of the students (Reeve & Jang, 2006). Teachers make room to let students solve a problem in their own way or to experiment to discover new things. The students' motivation and the self-regulation is fed by working with challenging assignments that offer freedom of choice.

2. Importance of 'Offering freedom' in honors education

Students who have teachers who use the autonomy-supportive teaching style have a larger intrinsic motivation and detectible competence, a greater perseverance at school, greater academic achievements, and a larger comprehension (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). Moreover, they function better in the classroom and achieve higher-level educational goals (Reeve & Jang, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy-support leads to involvement, and it offers an optimal challenge, contributing to meaningful objectives (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010).

3. Teaching behaviors that contribute to 'Offering freedom'

It is important that the teacher gives a meaningful rationale behind why putting forth effort during the activity might be useful. By doing this in an autonomy-supportive way, the perception of the task importance and the on-task engagement of participants' efforts increases (Reeve, Jang, Hardre, & Omura, 2002). Teachers can give this meaningful rationale by offering the student a realistic explanation (Jang et al., 2010). By doing so, the teacher offers structure by putting the learning activities of the students into a framework and being explicit about what is expected from the student (Reeve, 2009; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The teacher structures the learning activities for students in order to support the students and let them feel competent to work on the assignments. Teachers who offer structure are associated with a higher level of self-regulation in students (Sierens et al., 2009). Structure is utilized by a teacher to support autonomy and to facilitate connectedness.

The research of Wolfensberger resulted in three clusters of teaching strategies that can foster the offering of freedom (Wolfensberger, 2012; Wolfensberger, Drayer, & Volker, 2014):
- 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)

Creating space for choices and initiatives
Offering space to make choices and taking initiative implies that the program is (partly) directed by the student and is often called personalized education or student-centered education (Biggs & Tang, 2003). Quite often, this program type implies freedom of choice in the what of learning: assignments, choice of the subject, or working methods (Voogt, Smits, & Jonker, 2017). However, attention for the when, where, and how also supports learning activities with the student in the lead (Voogt et al., 2017). Using open assignments can also support and challenge students to experiment and try something new. Important in this is that the teacher asks questions and stimulates the students to think about their experiences and what they have learned.

Allowing students to experiment
Offering freedom through the sense of experimentation and the team feeling is fed by the following teacher behaviors (Reeve, 2016; Ryan, 2016):
- Providing space for students to solve the problem in their own way
- Encouraging students' experiments to explore new solutions or methods of working
- Creating challenging, open-ended assignments, which offer freedom of choices (content, materials, and methods)
- Providing explanatory and positive feedback to students
- Making instruction relevant to their lives by meaningful rationales
- Being interested and engaged as an authority

Experimental education has figured prominently in honors education programs for decades (Holman, Smith, & Welch, 2009).

Offering students trust and guidance and treating them equally
Offering students trust can be done by giving students special duties and responsibilities and second chances (Finley, 2013). The contact and the interaction with the teacher is an important determinant for the learning outcomes of the student. Activating engagement (Reeve, 2013) and genuine interest in the student is the key to success and to turning on the autonomous motivation of the students (Van Lieshout & Bakx, 2014).

A factor which has impact on the treatment of students is the way of communication and interaction (Sarrazin, Tessier, Pelletier, Trouilloud, & Chanal, 2006). Sarrazin et al. (2006, p. 292) distinguish different types of verbal interaction in their research: organizational communications, technical or tactical hints, asked questions, praises, encouragements, perspective-taking statements, negative communications, and criticism. For each type of verbal interaction, they give examples of communication in a controlling way, in a neutral way, or in an autonomy-supportive way. An example in a neutral way is by asking the student: is it your last try? An example in a controlling way is by asking a student: what have I just said, Paul? An example in an autonomy-supportive way is by asking the student: which exercise do you start with?

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