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Leveraging Insights from Psychology for Pedagogical Innovation

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Abstract

This article details the pedagogical value of psychological insights from Drs. Carol Dweck, Oliver James, and Edwin Friedman. While authored for lay readership, three of their books provided a conceptual basis for the redevelopment of a university-based introductory honors course. By incorporating Dweck's, James's, and Friedman's insights, the course now exhorts students to focus on growing in scholarly competence and often-neglected "emotional" abilities (e.g., decisiveness) important for scholarly leaders. Although anecdotal, evidence suggests that the pedagogical innovation has helped students understand their "scholarly identity" more in terms of their interests, instincts, and skills, and less in terms of their performance.

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Introduction – a tale of two tears

“I cannot stop thinking about how different my semester would look had I not been in the Honors Program. Last semester I attended a workshop you put on in which you discussed interests, instincts, and skills and this changed my outlook on how I should approach college. Additionally, over the summer I read the book, *Mindset* (by Carol Dweck), that you had suggested during the workshop. I have already adapted my thoughts to be focused on growth rather than glorifying success and I see this benefiting me greatly. I could name many other ways that the Program has positively impacted me but I wanted to mention these few as a thank you and encouragement for this upcoming year.”

– UHP student testimonial regarding the helpfulness of Carol Dweck’s book *Mindset* (Anonymous, 2014)

Honors educators routinely observe the emotional and psychological vicissitudes of their students. Metaphorically speaking, a “tale of two tears” can be recounted. On the one hand, educators may observe students whose eyes are full of tears of burnout, fatigue, and hopelessness; such students may be anxiety-ridden, emotionally or psychologically “stuck” in a muddy preoccupation with getting the right grade, fatigued from striving to maintain a performance-based identity. Many such students have lost the joy of learning and, for reasons that at least one psychologist (Dr. Carol Dweck, author of the book mentioned in the student testimonial above) can provide, have *stopped growing* as scholars. On the other hand, honors educators may observe tears of real joy; these students, through a variety of curricular, co-curricular, or extra-curricular means, have found ways to feed their intellectual curiosity, clarify

their sense of personal identity as a scholar, all-the-while growing in competence and scholarly skills. This “tale of two tears” is, admittedly, an oversimplification of a full range of psychological and anthropological issues, and, to be sure, there are no easy quick fixes. However, scholarly insights from the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology (just to name three) shed light on how honors educators might begin to strategically steer more students towards joy and fulfillment, giving them a better chance of avoiding burnout and entrenched anxiety. Through a pedagogical approach that leverages three scholars’ insights, a new introductory honors course (*Introduction to the University Honors Program*) was conceived and constructed. Innovators for the course drew on the wisdom of three scholars as expressed in three books: psychologist Carol Dweck and her best-selling book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Dweck, 2006), psychologist Oliver James and his popular *Affluenza: How to be Successful and Stay Sane* (James, 2007), and the late sociologist Edwin Friedman and *A Failure of Nerve* (Friedman, 2007). Their three books offered theoretical and practical insights that, in a pedagogical innovation described here, helped craft a genuinely “holistic” approach to student teaching. The term “holistic,” used at times in this article, relates to the concept of helping bring about student “wholeness,” and both terms were defined in 2013 by one honors educator:

“By holistic, I mean a perspective that takes into account persons as unified and whole entities...Honors students, like all other students and like all people, are multidimensional, complex, unique, and infinitely varied. In countless different ways, they are a blend, as are all human beings, of mind, body, and spirit. If the ultimate goal in contemporary honors programs and colleges is to help students learn to be, in every way, the best people they are capable of being, remembering that they are not disembodied intellects is necessary. They think, they feel, they

search for meaning, they sweat, they love, they read; they are in short, whole people, and they are best served if educators never forget their wholeness” (Schuman, 2013).

Insights from Oliver James, Carol Dweck, and Edwin Friedman

“Psychologists squabble over what humans’ fundamental needs are, but usually agree on four: we need to feel secure, emotionally and materially; we need to feel part of a community, to give and receive from family, neighbours and friends; we need to feel competent, that we're not useless, are effective in chosen tasks; and we need to feel autonomous and authentic, masters of our destinies to some degree and not living behind masks” (James, 2007).

In a book intended to persuade (and alarm) readers of Western Civilization’s so-called “Affluenza virus,” a destructive sociological force that fuels (particularly among successful persons) an unhealthy, psychological preoccupation with “money, possessions, appearances (physical and social) and fame” (James, 2007), Oliver James details why and how high-achievers (including, arguably, many honors students) often suffer from psychological and/or emotional distress. Referencing four fundamental human needs recognized by psychologists, James convincingly makes the case that anyone preoccupied with “getting more” (not just money and affluence, but also academic credentials) can find themselves in distress. Drawing on his scholarship as a psychologist, he highlights four fundamental human needs and how high-achievers might find those needs unmet (or disrupted). First, there is the need to feel secure; some high-achievers might experience feelings of insecurity and anxiety:

“If you are always worrying about whether you have enough... You will have a nameless sense that there is something else you should be doing, a free-floating anxiety. You will

be depressively running yourself down because you do not do as well as others, moving the goalposts if you do succeed” (James, 2007).

Second, there is the psychologically acknowledged need to be a part of a community; some high-achievers might find themselves with feelings of alienation:

“In choosing friends you are motivated by their use to you, not a desire to be close, emotionally, and to enjoy shared pursuits for fun rather than competition...Your values prioritise selfishness, not contributing to the wider community, so you miss out on the large satisfaction to be gained from supporting others and feeling supported...” (James, 2007).

Third, James mentions the need to feel competent; in high-achieving culture, there can be a tendency towards self-criticism and perverse feelings of incompetence, along with feelings of insecurity:

“However conventionally successful you are, it is never enough...There is only one response that you know: try even harder....walls of self-criticism and rampant anxiety rise up.” (James, 2007).

Fourth, James references the human need be autonomous and authentic; threats to this need, of course, include feelings of inauthenticity and powerlessness. James argues that “false wants” (in a society where the “Affluenza” virus reigns supreme) are the source of this (James, 2007).

However, in high-achieving honors-education culture, “false wants” of another variety can arise—a preoccupation with nothing more than straight-As, leadership titles, and awards—and lead to students not experiencing their lives as authentic persons.

James argues that the feelings of insecurity and anxiety can fuel a whole range of pathological and destructive behaviors, including (but not limited to) trying to cope with feelings

of inadequacy by narcissistically “falsely building oneself up” and exaggerating one’s “wonderfulness,” desperate attention-seeking, and self-medication through alcohol, drugs, and other “quick fixes” (James, 2007)). With respect to the third human need (the need to feel competent) cited by James, high-achieving academics who are solely focused on “making the grade” may, ironically, fail to grow in real skills and competence. Indeed, one of the great tragedies in American higher education (and, sadly, honors education) is the credentialing of graduates who, “bring very little to the table.” According to educational researchers Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, 45 percent of college students experience no statistically significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills during their time at college (Arum & Roksa, 2011).

Psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck, in *Mindset*, perhaps best articulates the psychological insights needed for achieving real growth in skills and competence while steering students away from the very anxieties to which James alludes. Dweck’s book provides a helpful distinction between what she terms the “growth mindset” and the “fixed mindset.” Dweck contrasts the growth mindset and the fixed mindset:

“Believing that your qualities are carved in stone—the *fixed mindset*—creates an urgency to prove yourself over and over” (Dweck, 2006).

“The *growth mindset* is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (Dweck, 2006).

Dweck argues that the fixed mindset can fuel anxiety and, indeed, even arrested development in students, including talented, high achievers. More positively, Dweck argues that

educators (and parents, and coaches) should communicate messages about growth, so that their students begin to attribute their performance (e.g., grades, awards, etc.) to the fact that they have studied and labored (rather than attributing performance to being “smart” or “bright,” improperly understand as fixed abilities). By communicating with growth-mindset vocabulary, educators affirm the development and acquisition of skills, knowledge, and competence and—significantly—create a culture in which students begin to see that they can learn from “failure” rather descending into an “identity crisis” that is so common amongst high-achieving academics (and others—most notably, athletes) who have cultivated such an unhealthy performance-based identity. Dweck goes on to elaborate:

“Should we try to restrain our admiration for our students’ successes? Not at all. It just means that we should keep away from a certain *kind* of praise—praise that judges their intelligence or talent. Or praise that implies that we’re proud of them for their intelligence or talent rather than for the work they put in.” (Dweck, 2006).

In *Mindset*, Dweck discusses a survey comparing statements of growth-mindset college students and fixed-mindset college students. The contrast is revealing, especially when the two types of students were asked to state the characteristics of being a “successful student.” According to Dweck, “students with the fixed mindset described ideals that could not be worked toward. You had it or you didn’t” (Dweck, 2006, p. 185). The fixed-mindset students stated that their procrastinating habits, desires to quit, and anxieties all came as a result of falling short of their perceived standards of success. On the other hand, growth-mindset students described the ideal successful student as a student who never gave up on learning and saw their grades as a growth opportunity and encouragement to improve, not as their identity. The growth-mindset

students were motivated to reach their ideals of a successful student, whereas the fixed-mindset students felt discouraged and unable to work towards this goal.

In addition to Oliver James and Carol Dweck and their wisdom, Edwin Friedman offers insights from his observations on the sociology of families, institutions, and society-at-large. Prior to his death, sociologist (and family therapist and leadership consultant) Edwin Friedman authored an insightful book that, like Dweck's and James's works, offers guidance for educators seeking to foster a genuinely "holistic" approach to education. If Dweck's *Mindset* and James's *Affluenza* offer psychological insights, Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve* (Friedman, 2007) provides insights into leadership-related problems rooted in the sociology of institutions and the emotional (im)maturity of individuals as well as organizations. While his insights touch on a variety of issues, two of Friedman's insights into leadership-related phenomena ("differentiation" and "decisiveness") can help educators in teaching and caring for high-achieving students including honors students.

Arguing that there is a "chronic anxiety" in poorly led organizations, Friedman insists that leaders should heed the important "emotional dimension" of their organizations (Friedman, 2007), and he argues for the development (i.e., to borrow Dweck's language, *growth*) of emotional strength and maturity—which can never be replaced by concepts, research-based methods, or intellectual ideas. Much of Friedman's theory of leadership is tied to what he terms "differentiation," which—along with intellectual competence—can help a scholar grow into a non-anxious, emotionally "strong," well-differentiated leader (which, he argues, is sociologically essential for all well-led organizations):

“...by well-differentiated leader I do not mean an autocrat who tells others what to do or orders them around, although any leader who defines himself or herself

clearly may be perceived that way...Rather, I mean someone who has clarity about his or her own life goals, and, therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about. I mean someone who can be separate while still remaining connected, and therefore can maintain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence...It is not as though some leaders can do this and some cannot. No one does this easily, and most leaders, I have learned, can improve their capacity” (Friedman, 2007), p. 14).

Friedman connects “differentiated” leadership to a scholar’s development in the capacity of “decisiveness.” Decisiveness, Friedman argues, can help leaders (including honors students aspiring to leadership) become not only scholarly and thoughtful, but also interpersonally (and intra-institutionally) effective leaders. With remarkably holistic insight into human anthropology as well as sociology, he argues for a reorientation of multiple conceptions of leadership including a much-needed shift in emphasis from *being informed* to *being decisive* (the latter of which, Friedman argues, is more important) (Friedman, 2007). Friedman laments that many “leaders tend to rely more on expertise than on their own capacity to be decisive” (Friedman, 2007), p. 12), and he attributes this tendency to an “obsession with data and technique that has become a form of addiction,” turning “professionals into data-junkies” who “avoid or deny...emotional processes within their families, their institutions, and within society” (Friedman, 2007), p. 14). Friedman’s sociological insights, in particular the emotional concepts of differentiation and decisiveness, offer much to honors educators who strive to treat their students as “whole, integrated human beings, with minds, spirits, and bodies” (Schuman, 2013), p. 5).

Incorporating the scholars' insights into the new course

In the redesigned *Introduction to the University Honors Program* class, the insights of James, Dweck, and Friedman are intentionally incorporated in a number of areas. Four particular instances are highlighted here, providing a framework for other honors educators keen to do the same within their curricula. First, and with respect to James' insights into the human need to *feel competent* and Dweck's insights into the idea of *growing* in competence, the opening module (creatively titled "The cruelty of incompetence") features a lecture that encourages students to ponder the areas of competence and knowledge in which they would like to grow. The class session also includes an in-class activity in which students discuss the knowledge, skills, and abilities that they currently possess and, significantly, wish to grow in or acquire. The two discussion questions, which all students discuss privately in pairs, are designed to prompt students to ponder not only their current knowledge, skills, and competence (i.e., "what do you *currently* bring to the table?") but also their *future* growth in such areas (i.e., "what would you *like* to bring to the table?"). The class lecture cites the supreme importance of both James's (the importance of competence) and Dweck's (the healthy aspiration to *grow* in competence), and the module assignment asks students to reflect on these issues in the form of a short essay:

"In 150-200 words, answer the following questions. Recall the importance of continuing to grow in competence and knowledge! What do you "bring to the table?" That is, what do you currently know (about the world, particular areas of interest, etc.), and/or what skills (abilities) do you currently possess? What would you like to "bring to the table?" That is, what would you like to know (about the world, particular areas of interest, etc.), and/or what skills (abilities) would you like to acquire?" (*Introduction to the University Honors Program* course question)

Second, and with respect to James's insights from his book *Affluenza*, an entire lecture is devoted to "Values: people, money, and 'affluenza.'" This lecture, which begins with an exercise in which the class, as a group, re-orders the words *use, serve, people, and money* (the correct order being use money, serve people), summarizes Oliver James's insights into how many high achievers (e.g., successful businesspeople) have ended up experiencing emotional distress because of their preoccupation of acquiring more—not just money, but also fame, credentials, accomplishments, et cetera. The lecture includes a handout, entitled "How 'Affluenza' attacks 4 fundamental human needs," that handsomely summarizes James's insights on the importance of the need to feel secure, the need to be a part of a community, the need to feel competent, and the need to be autonomous and authentic. The lecture ends with an exhortation (based on the psychological reasons provided by James), to the students, to be less preoccupied with seeking prestige, awards, money, and accomplishments and more focused on serving others through sacrifice and experiencing the joy of seeing others benefit.

A third part of the course leverages Dweck's growth-mindset insights. Approximately one-third of the way into the course, a handout (entitled "Discovering your scholarly identity," see Figure 1 below) is distributed and provides a lengthy discussion on the importance of viewing oneself in terms of things *other than performance*. The term "performance-based identity" is used to talk about the unhealthy singular preoccupation with academic performance and accomplishments (e.g., grades, awards, scholarships, titles of leadership positions, et cetera), and is contrasted with a framework, diagrammed in the handout, that presents an alternative way for scholars to view themselves—that is, in terms of their interests, their instincts, and their skills

(which they can *grow* in).

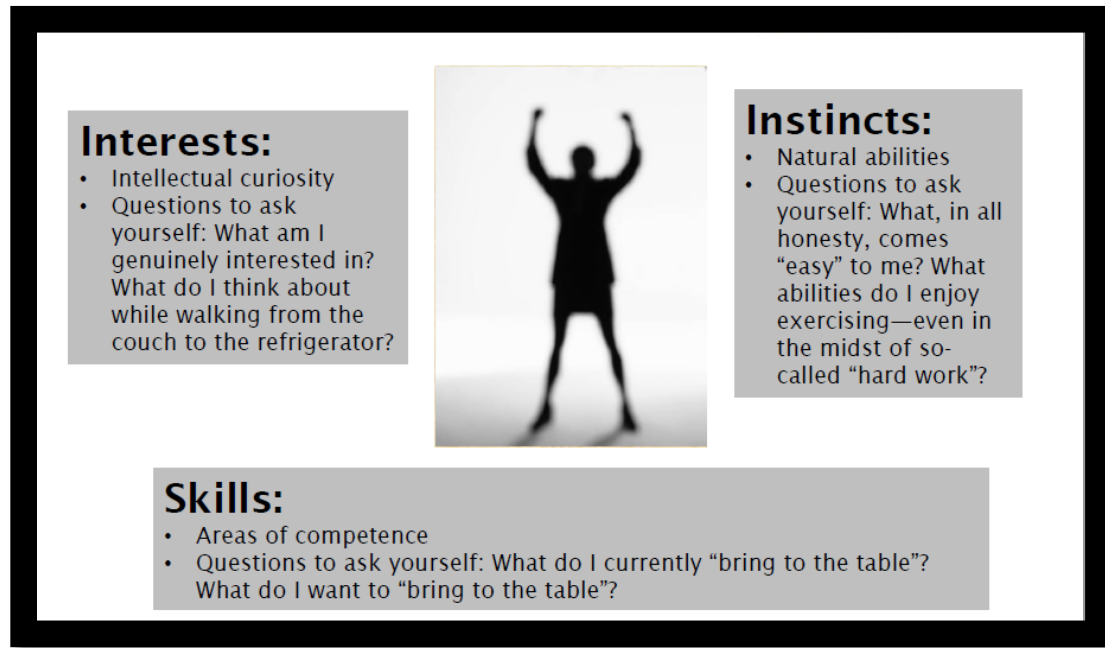


Figure 1. “Discovering Your Scholarly Identity” handout distributed in *Introduction to the University Honors Program*; students are encouraged to see their performance (grades, ACT scores, scholarships, leadership position titles, etc.) as only an expression of their identity, which they are encouraged to view consisting not of marks but “interests,” “instincts,” and “skills” (which they are always growing in).

Fourth, the course incorporates Friedman’s insights by devoting an entire module (and class lecture) to the concept of “the competent, well-differentiated leader.” That module features two prose-heavy handouts containing Edwin Friedman’s wisdom on the notion of being differentiated (that is, connected to others while remaining true to one’s own scholarly insights) and the importance of being decisive (which Friedman argues is needed lest scholars become mere information-gatherers or “data junkies,” to use Friedman’s language). In the class lecture, students are encouraged to contemplate what it means to be a well-differentiated leader (i.e.,

“someone who has clarity about his or her own life goals”). The module assignment includes an essay question that focusses on differentiation while also, incidentally, revisiting the already-addressed concept of competence:

“Reflecting on your own life as a scholar, how might *you* grow in both competence as well as the capacity to “self-differentiate”? What would it look like for you to continue to grow into a competent, scholarly, well-differentiated leader? Limit your response to 150-250 words.” (*Introduction to the University Honors Program* course question)

Feedback received

The new course exposes students to the psychological insights of both James and Dweck, as well as those of Friedman, and preliminary anecdotal evidence suggests these scholars’ insights have made a significant difference in individual students’ lives. Scores of students and parents have remarked about “how refreshing” it is to have an introductory course embracing such values as the “growth mindset”—with several remarking, effectively, “This is so refreshing” and “This is exactly what my son/daughter needs to hear.” Many students see not only the scholarly insight of Dweck and James, but also the *practical relevance* of their insights. Just as many talented, promise- and potential-filled athletes burn out—and lose the joy of their sport—because of the pressure to perform, many of today’s potential-filled honors students burn out—lose the joy of learning—because their education has become nothing more than a series of “grade-earning” opportunities to prove their supposedly fixed set of traits, to prove that they are indeed smart, bright, and talented. However, by providing a vocabulary that conforms to the helpful language of such scholars as Carol Dweck, the new course stands to help reverse such problems.

With Dweck's, James's, and Friedman's insights in full view to students, the new *Introduction to the University Honors Program* course has provided students with not only new vocabulary, but also the novel "scholarly identity framework" (see Figure 1, above) that emphasizes what holistic honors education rightly values: intellectual curiosity, the development of scholarly competence (and skills), and the graduation of scholarly, thoughtful, and fulfilled (joy-filled) leaders who can serve society. This programmatic objective can be achieved, in part, through course pedagogy that draws on the insights of Dweck, Friedman, and James; their insights stand to help students keep the joy of learning alive, grow in scholarly skills, and become more emotionally mature as scholarly, thoughtful leaders.

Conclusion and future evaluative steps

If universities are to be intentional in fostering "holistic" approaches in honors education, they might heed insights into what makes honors students "human." Psychology will always offer insights for honors educators, and the new course described in this article reminds us of that. This article detailed (a) the relevance of three psychologists' insights for honors educators, (b) the intentional incorporation of those insights into an introductory course for honors students, and (c) preliminary, albeit anecdotal, evidence of the success of this pedagogical approach. With respect to the latter, the evidence is, to be sure, not sufficiently systematic for robust evaluative purposes. The principal author, during the next year, plans to superintend a larger, second research project that will, amongst other research tasks, gather via focus groups substantial qualitative feedback from past students (drawn from the Spring 2014, Fall 2014, Spring 2015, Fall 2015, and Spring 2016 semesters) on the degree to which they have in fact internalized the theoretical insights presented during the course.

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McNeil Dolliver received a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration in 2015 from Kansas State University, where he served as president of the University Honors Program's student-governing body (the Honors Executive Board), founded the Honors Ambassadors (a group designed to promote and recruit new students to the program), and worked in many campus organizations to make himself and campus better. He now works for an international insurance company in their Advanced College Hire Program in the Dallas, Texas area.