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Note

Highlights of the 2019 honors session at the International Students' Conference in Siberian Federal University, Russia

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Abstract

In honors education, creating a community of talented and ambitious students is a goal of primary importance. Honors sessions at international conferences contribute to globalization of the honors community and offer opportunities for starting the dialogue between honors students of different universities and diverse academic fields. The current note provides insight into the discussion at the honors session organized by SibFU Honors College at the international students' conference "Prospect Svobodny 2019" at the premises of Siberian Federal University in Krasnoyarsk, Russia. The author describes the results of the interdisciplinary research activities presented at the session by honors students from Texas Christian University, Western Michigan University, University of New Mexico, Lamar University, and Siberian Federal University. The note reveals how the honors students' sessions become forums for reflecting on the value of learner agency and also for exploring the areas of prospective collaboration in interdisciplinary research for honors students worldwide.

Keywords: honors education; honors college; honors students; conference session; learner agency; interdisciplinary research

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1. Introduction

The annual International Conference "Prospect Svobodny" organized by Siberian Federal University, Russia aims at involving gifted students in research and innovative activities and also at intensifying the scholarly endeavors of post-graduate students and young scholars. Upon the launch of the SibFU Honors College, an honors session was integrated into the program of the Conference as one of its special events. The objectives of the honors session include discussing the results of honors students' research activities, identifying the most

promising directions of international interdisciplinary research for honors students, exchange of experiences with and ideas about honors students' best practices in project management, and discussing the directions of developing honors students' personal and professional skills by means of interdisciplinary research. The participants of the honors session were honors students and their research advisors from honors colleges of universities worldwide, honors educators, and scholars whose research is focused on honors students' interdisciplinary studies.

With SibFU Honors College being one of the pioneers of honors education in the Russian Federation (Tarasova, 2019), the results of the discussion that took place at the honors session allowed the college to define the strategies and tactics of applying international educational honors standards to the practices of Russian universities and understanding the overall importance of honors programs for both individual development and personal enhancement of gifted and talented students.

Among the topics suggested for discussion in various presentations are game technologies in honors education and best practices for developing skills of the twenty-first century (for instance, leadership and decision making, critical thinking, skills of effective communication, negotiation skills, creativity, etc.).

2. Honors program at the Siberian Federal University (SibFU)

The mission of SibFU Honors College is to contribute to the development of the creative personalities of students who are ready for an active realization of their own potential. SibFU Honors College was organized for talented students with a high level of academic achievement, for gifted, ambitious individuals, self-motivated and open to new knowledge.

SibFU introduced the honors program to the second- and third-year students who excelled in their studies at the university in 2017. With a total of 25,000 students in the university, the number of high-achieving students invited to enter the honors college is estimated at 2,000. As a result of the enrollment campaign, 110 students joined SibFU Honors College. The program of SibFU Honors College is specifically designed to achieve the goal of developing such competencies as self-learning and self-improvement. The program's objective is also to develop students' soft skills that allow individuals be more effective in collaboration when working on interdisciplinary projects. Honors students of Siberian Federal University may develop communication skills, cooperation, negotiation, leadership, personal agency, critical thinking, creativity, visual thinking, ability to find positive solutions in conflicts, capacity for decision making and project management, etc. The courses comprising the program of SibFU Honors College allow students to achieve the goals of improving these skills (SibFU Honors College Study Guide, 2017).

The Honors College provides an alternative educational mode to students of SibFU. Lack of choice and of academic freedom is typical for higher education institutions in Russia. Undergraduates, graduates, and even postgraduates typically follow the learning paths predetermined and led by instructors. The possibility of choosing own learning areas and an ability to build one's own educational trajectories is new and highly attractive to honors students of SibFU. Each semester, honors students have an opportunity to choose one or two courses that they find useful and important to them. The minimum number of courses

required to complete during two years of studies is four. According to student surveys, the reasons that determined their choice differed. Sixty-one percent selected courses to develop deficient soft skills assessed as essential to have, 23 percent opted for courses that offered “something new” and totally different compared to the materials their regular studies offered, and 16 percent decided on courses identified as resources to deepen knowledge and improve skills in the subject areas in which they were already proficient.

The educational program of SibFU Honors College is methodologically structured according to the principles of developmental learning, liberal education, and educational enthusiasm. The classes at SibFU Honors College are conducted in the format of business games, learning games, organizational activity games, discussions, debates, project making, and various forms of edutainment.

3. Honors session at “Prospect Svobodny 2019”

The title of the conference “Prospect Svobodny” is accurate and symbolic at the same time. The name refers to the exact address of Siberian Federal University that is positioned at the avenue (in Russian, “prospect”) with a name that speaks for itself (in Russian, “svobodny” means “free” or “liberal”). As the conference took place at the “Avenue of Liberty,” the organizers urged young participants to be bold and free in proposing their innovative ideas and ground-breaking research. The content of the honors session met the objectives of the conference, as the presenters attempted to suggest pioneering and original concepts in spheres of honors pedagogy, project management, and interdisciplinary research. The overall goal of the conference was to identify the most promising directions in the research of the undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate international students. Over 2,000 students presented the results of their research at more than 70 conference sessions. The aim of the honors session was to discuss the directions of developing honors students’ personal and professional skills by means of interdisciplinary research. The participants invited to the honors session included honors students and their research advisors from honors colleges of universities, scholars with their research focused on honors students’ interdisciplinary studies, and honors educators. More than 30 participants (20 students and 12 faculty members) from honors colleges of Russian and U.S. universities shared the results of their research at the honors session of “Prospect Svobodny 2019.” Both on-site, electronic, and off-site formats were suggested for participation. Forms of electronic participation, preferable for presenters from the U.S., included pre-recorded video-presentation and on-line video presentation.

At the honors session, students and faculty were invited to take equal roles of strategists of honors pedagogy. Members of the SibFU Honors College faculty Yulia Varfolomeeva, Arthur Kongarov, and Daria Shtork presented their research, “Partnership as a condition for the formation of initiatives in the learning environment.” The research aimed at examining the conditions for the formation of initiative in the learning environment. The presenters mentioned that the learner is constantly dealing with conflicts that need to be positively and constructively resolved. In the resolution of conflicts, the researchers advised to follow the model of cooperation where the conflict is approached as a meaningful encounter of equal partners, though different in their initial viewpoints. A stimulating and productive educational environment can be organized according to the principles of partnership in relations between teachers and students. Both the teacher and the student in such a

relationship have their own interests and resources. The ultimate objective of their relationship is to find the mode of interaction that satisfies their interests and becomes their mutual resource.

The results of the research prove that individual initiative occurs only in a learning environment that supports contractual relations, in the atmosphere where the action of the teacher is formalized and rationalized but at the same time leaves room for the response of the student. It was suggested that a negotiation process may be applied to setting this kind of relationship – from the registration of interests to the search for mutually beneficial solutions.

The honors session also served as a forum for educational reflection where students could express their views on the basic values of honors education together with members of the honors faculty and administration. SibFU honors student Alina Sosnovskaia spoke about the importance of learner agency. The student assessed personal agency—the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices—as the most important skill is that the honors program develops in students. The purpose of the honors program was defined as transforming the student into an active force in the system of education. At the honors session, students spoke about innovations in honors education. SibFU Honors College students Alina Sosnovskaia, Polina Grigorovich, and Anastasia Bugaeva presented their research “Development of leadership competencies of SibFU Honors College students: the project ‘The Territory of Intellectual and Liberal Inventions.’ ” The presentation was awarded with the highest recognition at the honors session. In their presentation, the students pointed out that honors education is focused on the development of leadership competencies of learners who would generate and develop innovative ideas and create teams and communities.

The analysis of the best honors practices in developing leadership (Honors Congress Leadership Conference, 2019) led SibFU students to the understanding that the most promising direction in the study of ways to improve leadership competencies in honors education is the organization of educational events initiated by learners themselves. As the methodology of the SibFU Honors College is based on gaming technology, the key objective of the research was to design a gamification model of a process of development of the students’ leadership competencies and to apply the developed model at the SibFU Honors College. The project “The Territory of Intellectual and Liberal Inventions” contributes to developing and improving honors community, as it promotes collaboration, encourages students’ initiative, and forms personal agency of the SibFU Honors College students through the use of the game approach. The use of gamification makes the process of education more interesting for students. This fact is especially relevant in the context of an educational environment organized from the students’ initiative, where learners determine the course of their own educational process.

The results of the survey undertaken in this project showed that, among the most sought-after leadership competencies in the SibFU Honors College, students indicated stress resistance; an ability to listen to and heed; an ability to organize others; willingness to be responsible for the team and the result even in case of failure; and a learning ability and aspiration for self-improvement. Confidence in decision-making and the ability to organize

others were also identified as priorities for development among students in the SibFU Honors College.

A gamification model of a development process of the honors students leadership competencies was designed according to the approach introduced by Werbach et al. (2012; 2019) in their 'Six steps to effective gamification' design system. The goal of the game was to develop the most relevant leadership competencies of SibFU Honors College students in the context of a self-motivated learning environment through their participation in the preparation, conduct, and reflection on an interactive gaming sessions. The authors of the project termed the desired behavior of the players as "the leader's conduct." The players' initial characteristics included the intention for self-realization capacity for productive cooperation, creativity, and focus on continuous personal and professional self-improvement. The students described four stages of integration of players in the game process: involvement, mastering, assimilation, and self-realization.

The designed gamification model of a development process of the honors students' leadership competencies was tested in SibFU Honors College in April 2019 in a game session format. The honors students' confidence in decision-making and their ability to organize were the skills to be improved in the process of the game. The authors of the game selected the story of space travel for this session. A legend was presented to the participants, suggesting that they travel on a spaceship and interact with many intergalactic races in order to exchange the achievements of society and technology. During the game session, the players were to learn qualities and competencies from each other, to assign roles within the spaceship team, to find out and present the most optimal solution to the proposed tasks and situations, and to analyze the results of game session.

As a result of their presentation, students declared that the analysis of the game's outcomes indicated the possibility to develop honors students' leadership skills with the help of gamification methods. They confirmed that the behavior of the players changed in the process of the game. The changes were caused by taking the leading roles, by practicing various strategies of decision-making within a team, and by active participation in improving their teamwork.

The students concluded that in honors education, which is always focused on the development of leadership competencies, activities that improve such skills would be more beneficial if introduced not by the administration and faculty of the honors colleges but by honors students themselves. Providing students with the opportunity to participate in the creation and realization of educational events aimed at the development of leadership competencies helps to increase their interest in the results of these events.

It is critical for honors education to develop global citizenship values in honors students. International collaboration and teamwork and different kinds of international internship are the key skills of the future (Van Eijl et al., 2017). SibFU honors student Daria Diatlova proposed the idea of the International Honors Internship project designed to meet the needs of the honors students striving to become global citizens and building a career in the international community. The survey showed that more than 60 percent of SibFU Honors College students have insufficient or no experience in communication with people from

other countries, but 57 percent of respondents expressed their interest to work at an international company. The results of the survey also showed that 60 percent of SibFU honors students consider soft skills important for building a career in the 21st century, although more than half of the students consider their soft skills undeveloped, and over 80 percent of them suppose that, depending on the country, the range of soft skills required can differ.

The project of the International Honors Internship program suggested participation of honors students from eight different countries and applying the strategy of experiential education. Studying soft skills in an online course (specifically designed for this program) resulted in using those skills in practice by solving real-life business cases in an international organization. The student proposed the organization could be a member of the international network of business partners engaged in collaboration with honors associations worldwide. Diatlova believed her project to be beneficial for all participants: the honors community, international companies, and society as a whole. The student emphasized that the International Honors Internship program would aim at breaking cultural barriers between honors students of different countries and at practicing their soft skills in real-life business cases. The internship program would also offer opportunities for interdisciplinary research. The project of the International Honors Internship program could help develop honors students' global citizenship values and their skills of intercultural communication.

The honors session created an invaluable opportunity for honors students of different countries and diverse majors to also explore the advantages of interdisciplinary research. The discussion that occurred at the conference provided insights into the research at the intersection of such disciplines as transportation network planning and history of literature; ethics and economics; and real estate management and architecture studies. Honors student of the University of New Mexico Joshua Rysanek spoke about the poetic map of roads and places in the city of Albuquerque. On the map composed from the result of the interdisciplinary research, each transportation landmark was juxtaposed with a milestone in the history of poetry created by various American poets in the city. Honors student of the Neeley School of Business at Texas Christian University Kiana Stephen presented her research on what determines people's moral perceptions and how these perceptions affect their views on self-driving cars' ethical dilemmas using "The Ethical Knob" (Contissa et al., 2017). Finally, SibFU honors student Anastasia Bondareva presented her interdisciplinary research "Architectural visual thinking of the real estate manager," with the purpose to analyze the architectural complex of Siberian Federal University and to identify the importance of visual thinking for managing the University as a real estate object.

4. Conclusions

The goal of the honors session was achieved, as the directions of developing honors students' personal and professional skills by means of interdisciplinary research were discussed in various aspects. The results prove that the global honors community can be strengthened through honors sessions at international student conferences, such as "Prospect Svobodny 2019." The sessions reveal their functions as a forum where students speak about necessary improvements in honors teaching and learning. It is possible to consider honors sessions as meeting points where the dialogue between honors students of different countries is initiated with prospects of subsequent growth into collaborations in

various areas of students' interdisciplinary research and project management. The next annual international conference "Prospect Svobodny" promises to be an event that attracts even more attention of honors faculty and students worldwide.

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