Honours onderwijs

How teaching outside the curriculum can boost your teaching skills
Table of Contents

Foreword........................................................................................................................................... 3
Planet and Politics: an honours course in the regular curriculum ............................................................ 5
From innovative idea to university-wide involvement in educational innovation............................................. 9
Set up a company with your honours student? ......................... 13
Applying theory from educational research in practice.... 17
Tutor of an honours project – a win-win situation ............ 21
Honours makes a difference, also for lecturers ...... 25
Supervising an interdisciplinary honours project from a broad interest .................................................. 29
Inspired?............................................................................................................................................. 32
Colophon ............................................................................................................................................. 32
Trek de aandacht van uw lezer met
**Foreword**

De The Radboud Honours Academy is an educational environment for enthusiastic, motivated students, who want to do something extra in addition to their studies in order to grow and develop further. The Honours Academy is also a place for lecturers who share the same enthusiasm for growing and developing further in their teaching. Teachers who are interested in trying something new in their teaching. Or teachers who feel energised by motivated students wanting to go a step beyond their own study programme.

Within the framework of the existing curriculum, teachers sometimes feel they lack the space to respond to current developments. Or to experiment with other forms of education, such as think tanks and studios. At the Radboud Honours Academy, they are given every opportunity to do so! Teachers can integrate the experiences gained in this way to further develop and shape their regular teaching.

The small-scale design of honours education is precisely what allows students and teachers to explore new ways of working together. At the Honours Academy, we often work in small discussion groups, where students can help shape the curriculum and students and teachers can learn from each other. Or teachers work one-on-one with a student, with the student often taking the lead. This way of teaching often allows teachers to gain unique experiences.

The Honours Academy offers students a number of options that differ in intensity and purpose. The role of the teacher also varies across teaching formats. In this booklet, we share seven stories of teachers who feel that teaching at the Honours Academy allowed them to boost their teaching within and beyond the regular curriculum.

We hope you find it inspiring!
Some years ago, Joyce Vermeer took up the challenge of developing an interdisciplinary course for the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religion. She did this in collaboration with PhD candidate Boris van Meurs. In developing this faculty-wide course, Vermeer deployed the knowledge she had gained from teaching an interdisciplinary honours course. The new course, called *Planet and Politics: Climate Change and Sustainability in Context* teaches students to take their knowledge into the world. The course can be seen as a compulsory honours course.

While supervising an honours lab and later a think tank in the context of the university-wide *Building Bridges* honours programme, Vermeer worked with lecturers and students from different backgrounds and therefore different frames of reference. This showed her the value of interdisciplinarity, and taught her about her own blind spots. For example, while working with legal expert Carmen Schleijpen, she discovered that finding a working definition for the term ‘sustainability’
can be a very different process depending on the discipline. From the perspective of philosophy, one could devote an entire class to it, but legal expert Carmen honestly wondered what she would do with the remaining time.

“By collaborating with other disciplines and seeing students do the same, you discover the many blind spots you have.”

According to Vermeer, one advantage of supervising an honours lab is that it is manageable, since it involves only a few meetings. You work with motivated students, who after the first two meetings do a lot of the work themselves, so your role becomes less and less significant with time. In addition, honours education leaves room for experimenting with new forms of teaching and therefore developing new skills.

“I learnt that sometimes it’s good to keep my mouth shut for a bit. It’s really nice to see how this makes room for students to develop their own ideas.”

In developing the new course, Vermeer was keen to use her recent insights. When supervising the honours course, she had seen that it works to let students
go about their business for a while and not intervene immediately, trusting that they will eventually figure it out on their own. Whereas previously, she had sometimes felt like a kind of knowledge-generating machine for her students, she discovered that sometimes you can just sit back and let the students manage things for themselves.

Just as in honours education, the new course developed by Vermeer gives students the freedom and space to ‘muddle through’ to arrive at a previously undefined final product. This freer approach also allows students to tap into their other talents, which can lead to extraordinary final products. For example, a group of students created a rap album in which all four of them represented a different perspective on sustainability. In this way, they demonstrated their mastery of theory in an original and creative way.

“Honours education has strengthened me in daring to try new things. It’s a kind of playground where you can try out new forms, and where nothing bad happens if something doesn't work straight away.”
Six years ago, Simon Tans, lecturer in International and European Law, had an innovative teaching idea that would allow legal practice to play a central role in teaching. The idea was to create a game setting in which students would simulate a case that was either real, or reality based. “This idea dovetailed very well with an initiative at our faculty to create an honours programme in which students could put their knowledge into practice.” Six years down the line, the Law in Action honours programme has run successfully for five years, and Tans is the theme leader for educational development at the Radboud Teaching and Learning Centre.

When Tans first had his innovative teaching idea, he was initially referred to the Education Design Team. They helped him to further develop his idea, which he found particularly inspiring. This got the ball rolling and resulted in the Law in Action honours programme.

Through this whole development process, Tans became increasingly involved in teaching innovation, and gained new contacts outside
his own faculty. He became more involved with the university’s support services and began increasingly to look beyond the boundaries of his own faculty.

“I asked the university for help, and they noticed that I enjoyed working on educational innovation. So I was asked to join all kinds of committees and consultation groups.”

In the *Law in Action* honours programme, which Tans created with Irene Laroooy and developed further with Annika Boh, students work on a fictitious case. “It’s a simulation, but it’s always also real.” As a lecturer, your role is to coach and facilitate students in their growth. Students set their own learning objectives. “Some students are very keen to enter the legal profession, while others don’t see it as a necessity at all. They don’t all have to walk the same path.” Students work together on a case study, simulating the reality of working for an employer as closely as possible. For example, the programme begins with a simulated job interview, which the student is later given the opportunity to reflect on.

According to Tans, an honours programme makes it possible to apply new teaching ideas in a friendly and positive setting, where everyone is in learning mode.
“You get a chance to try out your idea in a group that is by definition collaborative. You can ask them after every session what they thought of it and what they think could be done better.”

According to Tans, this makes it easier for whatever you are experimenting with to become a success. It also makes it easier to explain when things do not go as planned for a while. Over the years, this is how the honours programme grows and improves further. Sometimes, new ideas may even emerge during the programme.

Tans would like to integrate the experiences and teaching methods from honours education into regular education “Actually, this form of education should be available to all students.” This may take a lot of time, but it is certainly possible.

“If you scale it down a little, you can introduce all the methods of instruction we use in honours education into regular tutorials as well.”

In the coming period, Tans will continue to work on this, as well as on designing a new interdisciplinary project within honours education. In this project, biologists and lawyers will be working together on environmental issues.
Set up a company with your honours student?

Professor Roland Brock has worked as a lecturer in the honours medical programme for many years, and he has had the opportunity to supervise many honours students. For the past five years, he has also been chairman of the programme board. At the same time, he also teaches, is head of department, and leads his own research group. Despite his many positions, Brock says that he can easily combine teaching in the honours programme with his other commitments. In fact, working with motivated honours students has greatly benefited him.

Brock is a member of the Nanomedicine research group, where he focuses on drug delivery techniques. He offers honours medical students the opportunity to get a sneak peak during their first year. Students who are interested in the topic can then deepen their knowledge during the second year of the honours programme and complete the course with a three-month (Medicine) or five-month (Biomedical Sciences) internship. Recently, this internship took place in Bahrain where Brock is Adjunct Professor of Biochemistry. For Brock, this is a time of intense collaboration in which he guides and directs the student on a quest.
"I enjoy giving attention to an individual student. Together with the student, you can discover what is possible."

The first student Brock mentored was Sander van Asbeck, who enrolled in the Biomedical Sciences study programme in 2008. From the beginning, he planned to make a difference in the medical world by developing new drugs. When Van Asbeck heard about the honours programme, he knew it was the right fit for him. Van Asbeck explains: “I came across a flyer, and this really happened at an ideal time for me. I realised that the honours programme could help me fulfil my ambition.”

When Van Asbeck was asked to choose his honours internship, he selected a topic related to drug delivery systems, and was introduced to Brock. The two soon clicked. Brock says this kind of instant connection is rare. It can only happen when a lecturer with passion for his subject encounters a student with enthusiasm and drive. Brock explains: “At the time, Sander was still a very young student, yet he knew exactly what he wanted, and he quickly made the subject his own. Despite his talent, Sander was very modest and polite, and a trusting relationship quickly developed between us.”

After his studies, Van Asbeck went on to a PhD position, and he chose Brock as his supervisor. The Radboud university medical
center offers talented students the opportunity to apply with their own project, and Van Asbeck had secured such a position. Together with their colleague Jürgen Dieker, the two started working on targeted mRNA release, and the team soon saw that they had all the necessary ingredients to start their own company. The trusting relationship that had grown between Brock and Van Asbeck during the honours internship made them dare to take on this challenge. In the spring of 2016, the team won the Venture Challenge – and Mercurna was born. Later on, they founded the RiboPro company.

Brock and Van Asbeck look back fondly on their first collaboration, and say they would never have thought that an honours project could unfold like this. As a lecturer, Brock has learnt a lot from the experience.

“You really have to want to do it out of curiosity about the students who come to you, and recognise it as a privilege that you get the chance to meet highly motivated students. And then go on a voyage of discovery with them.”

Van Asbeck also appreciated Brock’s attitude as a supervisor: “The value lies in the intellectual, technological, and philosophical sparring between student and lecturer. That’s when you realise it can become something special if you put in the time.”
For her PhD project, Robin Willemsen studies how you can encourage creative thinking in primary schools. She also has 10% teaching duties at the university. When Evelyn Kroesbergen asked her to take over the coordination of the *Creativity and Education* honours course, Willemsen seized the opportunity with both hands. “You don’t often get a chance to follow through with something so specific. I really enjoy doing it. I have a lot of freedom and the opportunity to do something that is precisely in line with my PhD research.”

The *Creativity and Education* course is part of the faculty-wide Social Sciences honours programme, in which students explore socially relevant topics.

“The idea behind the course is to give students an idea of what creativity is, and how you can see it reflected in teaching, for one thing. We want to show students as many perspectives on creativity as possible.”
To showcase these perspectives, guest speakers from different movements are invited. Willemsen explains: “Everyone has a slightly different perspective on creativity, and says slightly different things about it. That’s exactly what we want, so that students can develop their own ideas about what creative thinking is.” Based on the knowledge gained, students are asked to develop a prototype to implement creativity in education. For the rest, the assignment is as free as possible, as Willemsen wants to impose as little as possible on the students.

Within the course, students have a lot of freedom, and they are invited to speak up and say what they think. Willemsen says, laughing: “In the beginning, you almost have to force it a bit by falling silent for an uncomfortably long time. I actually find it funny to see how this works.” She loves seeing that this creative teaching method, in which students are left very free, actually works.

“For me, it’s a great bridge between what I’m working on in my research and how I see it working or not working in practice. I find this very interesting myself. It helps me to conceptualise my own research.”
Willemsen is still more or less at the start of her teaching career. Coordinating this honours course has taught her a lot.

“Coordinating this course has given me the opportunity to make my own contribution. It is teaching me about what I find important in teaching, and the advantages and disadvantages of the teaching style I want to use.”

In future, Willemsen would like to move more towards teaching, and do less research. She explains: “I get a lot of energy from sharing knowledge with people who are also keen to have this knowledge. I find it challenging to do this in an interactive, not too hierarchical way, but I like a challenge.”
Alongside her work as lecturer and researcher in the Bachelor’s programme in English Language and Culture, Usha Wilbers enjoys supervising honours students in their projects. Within the Faculty of Arts, students are given the opportunity to devise and carry out an individual research project, based on goals they set themselves. “As a tutor, you guide a student through a two-year track. The process is very open. As a result, there are many opportunities, and the student has a lot of freedom.”

The tracks are individual and therefore highly personal. This leads to a lot of variety in both the end products and the process towards achieving them. For example, Wilbers once tutored a student who wanted to explore theatre more. This student eventually adapted an existing play – ‘The Hamletmachine’ by Heiner Müller – into a new play entitled ‘Warhole’, which she performed in 2018. Wilbers explains: “In the beginning, it wasn’t clear which way things would go. The final product seemed so far away. But in the end, the play turned out very well. This shows really clearly the student’s growth and maturation.”
Another student was very keen to take her first steps in academia. To this end, she took part in Wilbers’ research group and helped organise a conference. “Her helping to organise the conference was great for her and great for me too. It’s about so much more than acquiring more content, it’s about growing as a student, but also as a budding researcher.”

Supervising an honours track is a win-win situation, says Wilbers. You learn a lot from it too, and you get to explore a specific area of your expertise better each time. And you gain this knowledge and experience without having to implement it all yourself.

“Students immerse themselves into a particular aspect of your field of expertise. The student has the time to study a particular topic in great detail, and as a supervisor, there’s always something you can take away from that.”

According to Wilbers, for students, this leads to both personal and academic growth. This journey towards the end product is what Wilbers remembers most about the projects she supervised. Wilbers really enjoys alternating between regular teaching and honours education.
In regular teaching, the format is fixed, which is why it is so much fun to work with a good student in a freer way in the honours programme.

“This freedom that students experience can lead to great things. There’s more time and space for the student’s own input.”

Freedom does bring a different kind of responsibility for the lecturer. Wilbers notes that students are used to the regular education system with its deadlines, lectures, and exams. They know this structure, but in the honours programme, this is precisely what you let go of. As a tutor, you have to take this into account, and really work together with the student.

“I highly recommend to lecturers that they gain experience with an honours student. It enriches your own research and you get to know a student in a new way. You guide them in a way where the individual is much more central.”

Honours makes a difference, also for lecturers

Esther-Mirjam Sent is Professor of Economic Theory and Economic Policy. She is also chair of the Labour Party. She finds it important to translate scientific insights into concrete policy recommendations. She tries to break down the concept of ‘Homo Economicus’, for example by looking at how norms and values affect the economy.

Sent first came across the Honours Academy when she supervised honours students who were writing their thesis. She was later appointed Vice Dean of Education at the Nijmegen School of Management, where she was responsible for the faculty honours programmes. Sent then contributed to several interdisciplinary honours courses, such as the Master’s programme on Project Impact and the honours lab for students with a board position. This academic year, for the first time, she is teaching the honours lab ‘How to translate science into politics?’

Sent studied and worked in the US for 15 years, an experience that has taught her that the Dutch system is far too rigid. “In the Netherlands, you have to choose what you want to study in secondary school, which I don’t think is right. Young people should have the opportunity to develop more broadly. This is how it’s done at American universities, where a wider range of
subjects is mandatory before you can make a final choice.” She explains that there is a misconception in the Netherlands that you need all economics subjects to become a good economist. “When really, most of it is training on the job. Students should be given much more space to learn about different academic disciplines,” she says.

According to Sent, the Radboud Honours Academy fills this gap well. She says she is very happy with the students she gets to mentor because their enthusiasm really motivates her. She still follows her former students with pride. Like Sam de Muijnck, who is now chief economist of the independent think tank 'Our New Economy'. That is someone she is genuinely proud of. Sent goes on to say that she has learnt a lot from supervising honours students.

“I have learned to see things from the students’ perspective. This has inspired me to new research projects within my own field.”

She explains that the prototype honours student has a lot of energy, and cannot be pigeonholed. This enthusiasm is contagious. So her advice to lecturers is to enjoy it: “Put yourself in the students’ shoes and meet them in their enthusiasm.” She also explains that this is not a one-way street, but that it is important to be inspired to keep improving your own teaching and research.
“When you give honours students space, they grow wings, and they help me grow wings in return.”

As a lecturer, you have a lot to offer honours students. The research that students engage in for their honours programme is not research that the lecturer already knows the answer to. This means the research is not a normal assignment, but real science. Completing a research project gives students self-confidence, a keen perspective, and a wider network. Sent explains that she considers it a great honour to see that she can have such an important positive impact on a student's life.

“I love seeing that I can make a difference in someone's life; as lecturers, we are often not aware of this.”
Fleur Zeldenrust is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Science. A few years ago, she was asked to supervise an interdisciplinary group of students within her faculty’s honours programme. Interdisciplinarity is something that Zeldenrust is very much in favour of. She herself has broad interests, and a background in both Physics and Biology. Her field of expertise, computational brain science, lies at the frontier of Biology, Physics and Artificial Intelligence. Supervising an interdisciplinary honours project ties in very well with this. Zeldenrust explains: “The structure of honours programmes appeals to me. I enjoy working with students and researchers from different backgrounds.”

The students Zeldenrust supervised for one year were working together to write a research proposal on a topic of their own choosing. With students in Biology, Artificial Intelligence, Computing Science and Physics, many different perspectives were represented in the sessions. Zeldenrust: “In the beginning, it was a bit of a challenge to
find a good way of working together. As a facilitator, I tried to stay in the background as much as possible. I guided them in the process, of course, but I tried to involve myself as little as possible with the content.” This form of teaching was challenging both for the students and for Zeldenrust.

“Students are used to being given the material and being asked to reproduce it. Now they had to create something themselves. It was also a challenge for me to guide this in the right way.”

In addition to guiding the process, the supervisor of an honours project also acts as a role model. Zeldenrust explains: “It’s quite an art to be able to ask critical questions without the other person feeling attacked. It’s a tricky balance. As a supervisor, you can lead this by setting an example.” In the course of the year, the students Zeldenrust mentored have grown into true academics. She explains: “When I see the difference between the start and end of the project in terms of how they interact with each other, they have definitely made great progress. I have seen them grow in the way they discuss things and ask each other questions.” It was also a learning process for Zeldenrust.
“Collaboration in such a diverse group is an interesting social process. You really have to try all sorts of things to guide it well. And you also learn about topics you don’t know much about yourself yet.”

A crucial difference with respect to regular teaching, according to Zeldenrust, is that in honours education, you can supervise a small group of students in an intensive way. Zeldenrust talks about the students: “These are highly motivated students, otherwise they wouldn’t have chosen an honours programme. They were all incredibly interested and curious.” In addition, there is a lot of interaction with other lecturers supervising an honours project.

“You regularly interact with a small group of lecturers, and you also really learn from each other in the process. That was something I really enjoyed.”

Honours education has made it clear to Zeldenrust how important it is to let students solve and figure things out for themselves. She would really enjoy guiding a group of honours students again in the future.
Inspired?

Are you interested and would you like to know more? If so, please contact us and we can explore the possibilities.

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Colophon

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