

Honor's Educational Philosophy

Removing the *Friction* to Connection

Drawing on the teaching of Joel Podolny, Founder and CEO of Honor, founding Dean of Apple University

Every company now has the same AI tools, and those tools tend to hand everyone the same answers. What they can't supply is the thing that has always set great organizations apart and helps them make great decisions: their own judgment.

That judgment lives in thousands of small calls made every day, most of which no manager ever sees. You can't hand it to people in a document. Leaders develop it by working through real problems with colleagues, hearing how someone they respect reads the same situation differently, and adjusting. It's learned in the company of others.

Great learning comes from connection. It happens when a new idea links up with something you already knew, when your view runs into a colleague's, when the material moves you, or when a lesson shows up in a decision you make the following week. Anything that gets in the way of those connections is friction. Removing the friction that blocks connection is our north star.

“Great learning comes from connection — and we're in the business of destroying any friction that gets in the way.”

Joel Podolny, Founder and CEO

Honor's belief that the educator's main role is to facilitate connection grew out of our founder, Joel Podolny's years as the founding Dean of Apple University. Joel's model at Apple was built around the idea of social learning – that learning should be active, inclusive, and as frictionless as possible. Honor has brought this model to other organizations and refined it with every program we build.

The four frictions

🕒 North star: Remove the friction to connection

Friction

What gets in the way

What we do

01

Between ideas

People can't see how new material relates to what they already know, so it never changes how they think.

→ Our instructional designers build courses around questions, using stories and cases chosen to spark debate.

02

Between people

Even if they are in a cohort, people learn alone and rarely hear how colleagues see the same problem.

→ Content becomes a conversation when learners can react, highlight, and reply to content online, right beside the material.

03

To feeling

Training informs people but seldom moves them, so little of it is remembered.

→ Our instructors and designers build learning opportunities with emotional weight, and leave room to reflect on them together.

04

To practice

Lessons stay in the course and never reach the decision on someone's desk.

→ AI coaching helps people apply what they have learned in the flow of their daily work.

01

Friction between ideas

Most people can point to at least one experience that permanently changed how they see something. Often it came from seeing two things side by side that they had never thought to connect.

The anthropologist Edwin Hutchins tells a story that makes the point well. Navigators in Micronesia's Caroline Islands would cross long stretches of open ocean by tracking a reference island that sits below the horizon out of sight, holding their position in their heads as the stars move overhead. When researchers showed these sailors Western-style maps, drawn as if from high above, the sailors found them odd and did not know how to use them.

Initially, these sailors did not feel like they needed to use these new maps. They had their frame of reference, learned from the people around them.¹ However, once these sailors eventually learned how to read Western maps, they came to appreciate another tool in their kit to get where they needed to go, especially as they went beyond the waters with which they were familiar. And the Westerners learned a new way of navigating the Caroline Islands – a way that was actually more reliable than paper maps, which are often distorted.

Teachers have long known how to lower friction between different points of view so that people with different mental maps can learn from each other. A good Socratic instructor – one who leads with questions rather than answers – rarely hands over the connection themselves. They ask the question that lets the learner reach it, then the next one, until the learner gets there alone. It takes longer than explaining, and it lasts longer, because the learner did the thinking.

“If the trainer lifts the weights, you can't build muscle. The more of the work the learners do, the better.”

Joel Podolny, Founder and CEO

That's why every Honor course starts with questions rather than answers. It's also why so much of our work happens before a lesson is written. Our instructional designers, some of whom built Apple University's own curriculum, work with a company's experts to find the story, case, or image that will get a room of smart people arguing productively. Honor Create, our product for instructors, is where that expertise becomes a course. It lets an expert turn what they know into interactive lessons, with or without a designer beside them.

02

Friction between people

The best discussions produce a particular moment: two people who both sound completely reasonable turn out to disagree. Sorting out why is often where the learning happens, about the problem and about yourself.

Great facilitators create those moments intentionally by keeping the whole conversation in their head. When someone makes a point that will matter later, they say so and return to it twenty minutes on. When two comments pull in different directions, they ask the people who made them to square the two. The group ends up doing the connecting. That's what we mean when we say learning should be active and collaborative: everyone takes part, and people learn from each other as much as from the expert at the front of the room.

¹ Edwin Hutchins, *Cognition in the Wild* (MIT Press, 1995).

From the Apple University classroom

The debate that changed Steve Jobs's mind

One of the most beloved classes at Apple University opened with a fact that caught most of the room off guard: when Apple was deciding whether to bring the iPod and iTunes to Windows, Steve Jobs was one of the strongest voices against it. When they heard that remark, attendees sat up and paid closer attention.

The rest of the session looked at what made that internal debate good enough to change his mind, and at how a company keeps having arguments that good. The story was the hook. The real subject was how Apple makes decisions.

The best courses with Honor are the courses with hooks like this one that help people lean in, engage, and form the connections at the heart of great learning.

The pandemic showed how much of this used to depend on everyone being in one room. When learning moved online, the content made the trip easily. The connection between people was much harder to bring along. Honor was built to solve that problem at a scale that reaches every team, region, and new hire.

Honor Learn is where those connections are made. It presents material as a conversation instead of a video to get through. Learners mark passages highlighting what stands out, providing emotional reactions, and replying to one another in conversations that sit right next to the content. Each person can see how colleagues are thinking, even when they're working on different days. The product effectively “remembers” people's comments just as an expert instructor would.

Even now, we treat every step between having a thought and sharing it as friction. Even after highlighting a passage, the next step – opening a comment box – is added friction, so Learn now opens it automatically. That single change increased participation roughly fivefold.

03

Friction to feeling

Learning often stays with people because it emotionally moves them. Adults deserve more of that emotion in corporate training: surprise, discomfort, admiration, and the kind of recognition that makes someone look at their own work differently.

At Apple, Joel taught a lesson on Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech. The “aha” moment in the class comes when people learn that the speech's most famous passage wasn't in King's prepared text.

King was 34, facing a quarter of a million people, holding a speech he had worked on for days. Yet, he decided to set it aside and improvise. The question: why did he decide to go off script?

The conversation that follows always went somewhere unexpected. Was it luck? Was it something more? Or had years of preaching prepared him for exactly that moment? From there it's a short step to the group's own work: the moments that will matter most for each of them, and the practice it takes to be ready. People leave with a new appreciation of King and a clearer view of themselves.

“The ‘I Have a Dream’ class was a gift to teach because it wasn't just a cognitive experience. It was an emotional experience.”

Joel Podolny, Founder and CEO

Moments like that, where an idea lands and a feeling comes with it, are what we try to create in every program we build with an organization. Building an emotional response shapes our smallest choices, from the content our course designers pick to how much room a discussion leaves for people to say what something meant to them.

04

Friction to practice

Judgment is only worth something when it gets used. We care about the connection between what someone learned in a course and the decision in front of them on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon.

Honor's AI product, Calibrate, closes that distance. It learns what good judgment looks like at a particular company and helps people practice it inside their daily work, while they're making the call. Through tailored simulations and a Socratic chat interface, Calibrate users benefit from a little bit of extra preparation, tailored to their work and grounded in their company's own standards.

The AI exception: some friction worth keeping

Not every kind of friction should go. Some of it is the learning itself. The effort of working out a connection is exactly what makes it last, and a tool that removes the effort takes the learning with it. AI makes this a practical question. It's very good at spotting patterns across huge amounts of material and explaining how they fit together, and it can play a Socratic partner that asks instead of tells. It can also make the shortcut hard to resist. Why work through a problem, or hear how three colleagues see it, when you can ask for the answer?

The cost of no friction

17%

lower exam scores with
unrestricted AI help

Researchers are starting to measure what that shortcut costs. In a 2025 study of nearly a thousand high school math students, those given unrestricted access to an AI assistant did better on practice problems but 17% worse on a later exam than students who never had it. A version designed to guide students toward answers, instead of giving them away, did not see such a decrease.²

We build AI into Honor with that distinction in mind. On the Honor Platform, AI helps instructors find the passages most likely to get a group talking, so people spend their time on what matters most in the material. Learners can also use AI to go deeper on content, clarify what they don't understand, and draw connections across different parts of each course.

Putting it to work

Every Honor engagement starts with listening. Our team sits down with an organization's leaders to understand the business problem in front of them and the judgment it calls for. Then we design a learning experience around that problem, pairing expert instruction, in person or online, with the Honor Platform and AI coaching that carries into daily work.

At a global technology company running its first program for senior executives, participants were given about an hour of pre-work. In every cohort, the median participant spent more than that, not because they had to, but because they thought the material was that interesting. In one, the median reached 2 hours and 43 minutes, and no one said it was too much.

² Bastani, H., Bastani, O., Sungu, A., Ge, H., Kabakci, Ö., and Mariman, R. (2025). Generative AI without guardrails can harm learning: Evidence from high school mathematics. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 122(26), e2422633122. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2422633122>

Nearly every decision we make, from the questions an instructor asks to where a comment box appears on the screen, is about making it easier for people to connect ideas, connect with each other, feel what matters, and use it. Everything in this paper comes back to one belief: learning is better when we learn *together*.

Next step

Start with a conversation

If your organization is working out how to build the judgment that makes it distinctive, we'd welcome the chance to help. Reach us to schedule a first working session with your team.

Let's talk →

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