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## **The Place of Character Education in the University: Early Lessons from an Explicit Course on Virtue**

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### **Introduction**

The end and purpose of education for Saint John Baptist de La Salle was salvation. The Brothers of the Christian Schools taught primarily through their own example. In 1785, Brother Agathon, who was then the Superior General, wrote *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*, drawn from their founder<sup>2</sup> Saint John Baptist de La Salle. This instruction was intended to help the Brothers in their high calling to teach children. Living the virtues clearly played an essential role in Lasallian education from the very beginning.

A virtuous life is the goal of character education. Character is necessary for individuals to flourish, both personally and communally. Flourishing individuals make up flourishing societies. Flourishing is "human life at its best, in all of its dimensions: social, moral, emotional and intellectual ... (It) relies on the actualization of human excellence through character strengths or virtues: stable dispositions that combine perception, cognition, emotion, motivation and action to respond in admirable ways to different situations in different spheres of human life" (Jubilee Centre, *Character Education in Universities*, 2020, p. 2). For Saint John Baptist de La Salle and for all Lasallian educators today, we have an even higher end for the instruction of students than intellectual formation alone.

### **Character Can Be Caught, Taught, and Sought**

Flourishing individuals find happiness in life and fulfill their potential. Character education happens in homes and schools, whether it is intentional or not. It begins at birth and is greatly influenced by the environment in which a person is raised. Children, who have parents or caregivers who exemplify virtue, are more disposed to develop virtuous habits. Virtue, or traits which form the building blocks of character, are malleable; they can be nurtured or hampered (Jubilee Centre, 2017). A life of virtue comprises various components: virtue perception, virtue knowledge and understanding, virtue emotion, virtue identity, virtue motivation, virtue reasoning and virtue action and practice (2017).

Virtue literacy begins with virtue perception, noticing situations which call for a virtuous response. It also includes virtue knowledge and understanding which includes knowing what a virtue is and why it is important. The third part, virtue reasoning, entails deliberating and making judgments about what actions to take to put virtues into practice in particular circumstances. The Jubilee Centre (2020) describes virtues being "caught," "taught," and "sought." Ideally, virtues would be caught during a child's early formation but, even if a young person grows up surrounded by negative moral habits, there is still hope that they can be taught what virtues are and practice them. Dialogue plays an important role here as it opens such a person to desire different habits. This

desire can lead to virtues being sought. Plato insists that the “only way to live a fully virtuous life is to develop virtuous habits” (Jonas, 2016, p. 8). We cannot be satisfied with merely acquiring knowledge of the virtues. Both knowledge and action are required. For, as Aristotle says, we inquire “not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use” (Nicomachean Ethics II, 2009, p. 23).

Although the young may more easily acquire the dispositions for virtue growth, virtue knowledge and understanding requires higher levels of thinking and reflection. Aristotle himself taught that young children need the “external input of parents and teachers . . . young people at this early stage are incapable of the practically wise reflection of the morally or virtuously mature agent: they have to attain ‘years of discretion’ through education and experience” (Carr, 2017, pp. 113-114). Hence, the appropriateness of character education at the university level.

There are many reasons for university-level character education. First, virtue is good in and of itself. It is necessary for human flourishing and promotes integrity, a just and inclusive community, religious faith, moral development, citizenship and leadership, integrity in the workplace; and it is in line with our Lasallian Catholic mission (Lamb, 2021). While many students enter college in order to get a good job and make more money, I have found that many also appreciate the formative aspects of their college experience and, as they seek to discover their identity, want to be good people. The development of character is not only good for the individual, it is good for society (Fishman, 2015; Jubilee Centre, 2020). Acquiring knowledge and skills can be quite dangerous without equal attention to moral virtues and good character.

Character and virtue education is, as Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University argues, “inherent to university education” (Murray, 1996). At a time when trust in leaders is down, higher education institutions are well positioned to effect change as they educate future leaders in all fields and disciplines (Bok, 1976). Both Plato, in *The Republic*, and the Founding Fathers of the United States of America stated that the success of self-governance is dependent upon the character of its citizens (Berkowitz and Bier, 2007). Bok advocates for a course based on moral dilemmas in which students are expected to enhance their moral perception and moral reasoning and “help students clarify moral aspirations,” that is “define their identity and establish the level of integrity at which they will lead their professional lives” (Bok, 1976, p. 28). Establishing a similar level of integrity in their personal lives is no less important. The benefit of doing this within the context of a college course is that students can “grapple with moral issues in a setting where no serious personal consequences are at stake” (Bok, 1976, p. 28).

### **An Explicit Course in Virtue**

Recently, I had the opportunity to co-teach a course at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota. My work with the University of Birmingham, U.K., made me curious about the impact of an explicit course in virtue. Especially in the context of higher education, virtue needs to be integrated into every area of the university where virtue can be “caught” in the culture and “sought” by students themselves through service and learning opportunities (Jubilee Centre, 2020). Still, I wondered how students might respond to a course where virtue is explicitly “taught” with the goal of increasing virtue literacy through reading, discussions, reflection, and consideration of moral

dilemmas. As I set out to design the course, I anticipated that the students at Saint Mary's would, as research has suggested, benefit from this course (Lamb, 2021; Wright, 2019).

The course was designed to introduce students to concepts and terms central to character development. Priority was given to increasing student understanding of the four cardinal virtues, three theological virtues, and the overarching meta-virtue of *phronesis*. Over the course of the semester, students were introduced to various approaches to character education including the Jubilee Centre's Framework. Various teaching methods were employed given the value of a "combination of pedagogical approaches" (Arthur et al., 2017, p. 71). In particular, students were asked to reflect on personal experience, engage with virtuous exemplars, and form friendships of mutual accountability (Brooks, Brant, and Lamb, 2019). Designed to be an introduction to character education in order to increase virtue literacy, the course was still academically rigorous and regularly encouraged students to reflect and think critically. The instructors were mindful that "what is called 'character education' at the university level distinguishes itself fairly sharply from the development of character at earlier stages of the educational system" (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2020, p. 8).

The course fulfilled a theology requirement and twenty-one students, mostly first-years, were enrolled. Students were invited to reflect on their own virtue practice during the semester by selecting one virtue that they desired to practice. Students were given time to reflect, with another student who served as an accountability partner, on their practice and discuss their growth (or lack of growth) in this particular virtue. The entire class focused on the virtue of gratitude, given its connection with overall wellbeing, by keeping a gratitude journal. The journal was intended to increase their awareness of the opportunities to practice this virtue.

Character is built around virtue knowledge, virtue reasoning, and virtue practice. In virtue knowledge, the student first recognizes that they are in a moral situation. The situation triggers emotions, desires, or feelings in them. They identify the virtues that can educate their specific emotions toward realizing the good in the situation they are in. Virtue reasoning then comes into play as they think about how they can practice or give expression to the virtue or virtues that correspond to the emotions or desires, those which give the "best expression of the golden mean." Finally, virtue practice takes over as the student acts and then reflects on how well they handled that situation. These reflections are rich resources for discussion and growth.

### **Design of the Instrument**

Students enrolled in the "taught course" (as opposed to a "research course"), in which character education is formally taught, were given a questionnaire at the beginning and end of the semester. The pre-test questionnaire was intended to establish temporal precedence of the intervention and test our assumption that levels of virtue literacy in students ranged from low to moderate. The same questionnaire was used at the end of the semester as a post-test to help evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

For this pilot evaluation, we created a new instrument rather than using an existing questionnaire with validity and reliability already established. The questionnaire included both closed- and open-

questions. Demographic data such as the course year of the student was collected, but otherwise data was collected anonymously.

Multiple questions in the questionnaire were designed to determine the level of virtue literacy in students by asking students for definitions of terms. Examples included:

- *Prudence is best described as:*
  - a) *Practical wisdom*
  - b) *Humility*
  - c) *Gentleness*
  - d) *Justice*
  - e) *I don't know*
  
- *Vice is best described as:*
  - a) *The absence of virtue*
  - b) *A bad habit*
  - c) *A moral failing*
  - d) *I don't know*
  
- *Temperance is best described as:*
  - a) *Self-control*
  - b) *Courage*
  - c) *Wisdom*
  - d) *Generosity*
  - e) *I don't know*

Other questions in the questionnaire asked students about their perception of the campus ethos, particularly about their observation of virtues being modeled or discussed. Examples included:

- *On campus I see the virtues of wisdom, self-control, courage, and justice being modeled by most faculty* (similar questions were asked about staff, students, and coaches):
  - a) *Consistently*
  - b) *Often*
  - c) *Sometimes*
  - d) *Rarely*
  
- *Where should virtues be discussed?*
  - a) *In class*
  - b) *Through extracurricular activities*
  - c) *In campus ministry*
  - d) *All of the above*

The questionnaire also included two brief case studies. Following each case study, students were given an open-ended question asking them to explain their thoughts about the situation and the decisions of the actors.

While the class required all of the grading requirements of a university course, it was communicated to students that the ultimate objective of the course was more than achieving a grade, that is, to invite them to grow in virtue. In addition to a post assessment, a survey was administered at the end of the semester. The survey revealed that, as a result of the class, 85% of the students agree or strongly agree that they grew in their knowledge of what virtues are and 95% grew in their knowledge of specific virtues. Seventy percent indicated that they are more likely to practice virtue after the course. Fifty-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that virtues were important to them before they took the class. This increased to 86% at the conclusion of the course.

Of the various methods used, most students found class discussions and consideration of moral dilemmas most helpful and 85% agree or strongly agree that they are more likely now to try to grow in virtue. As with any study, there are several limitations to this study, one of which is how enduring the survey responses are. For example, one could expect the effectiveness of the course to lessen six months after the end of the class. However, I do believe that the preliminary results are significant enough to give strong consideration to the value of an explicit course in virtue.

From my observation, students seemed most engaged in the class when discussing a moral dilemma, especially those brought up by students themselves from stories that they had read or heard about in the news. There was passion in their voices; yet they were also respectful of one another's views. Given the emotions often attached to moral issues, it is important that discussions about them take place in a safe environment. If students experience school as a caring community, the work of character education is more likely to be successful (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). This is also true if students experience a sense of belonging (Lamb, 2021). A nurturing environment enables students to "practice and reflect upon character" (Arthur, 2015, p. 14). Mentors are also essential for a university which seeks to foster growth in virtue. In particular, "the degree to which students feel a member of staff knows them personally is important" (Arthur, 2015, p. 16).

I encouraged repeated practice of virtue throughout the course. For Aristotle, "virtues are cultivated relationally and dynamically, by emulating role models and by way of repeated practice." In the context of higher education, this habituation must be "rational, reflective and self-directed," not just the copying that younger students perform (Character Education in Universities, 2020, p. 8). College faculty and staff can and do provide inspiring examples of virtues which students may choose to emulate. For example, students can catch the "passion" as well as the "subtle judgment" from a mentor with whom they have a relationship (Williams, 2017, p. 6). This is a familiar concept to those in Lasallian education.

## **Discussion and Future Possible Directions**

Dan Wright, a former Senior Fellow at the Jubilee Centre and Head of the London Oratory School, makes a case for an explicitly "taught course" in character education, in addition to the implicit methods of integrating it across the curriculum, role modeling and teaching profession specific ethics. He sees the purpose of an explicit course to provide for "the fullest exploration of the practical and theoretical issues associated with their own personal development or growth in virtue, with their individual flourishing, with their living well" (Wright, 2014, p. 3). He sees it as the "most focused means to providing stimulating and structured support ... to think through how to

become virtuous” (Wright, 2014, p. 3). The issues students face can become the substance of reflection which leads to growth and flourishing:

Through a taught course we are given concepts, tools and practices that will enable us to grow deeper into the freedoms of the moral life and that only comes with theory, practice, discussion, experience, reflection and exposure ... (it is) the best hope ... strengthening and informing what goes on elsewhere in the school in terms of character education ... a discrete space to enable students to integrate in a systematic fashion ideas and insights gained in other parts of the curriculum about the essential features of human flourishing and how they fit together in a well-founded life (Wright, 2014, pp. 5-6).

There are three approaches to take on in a “taught course,” which would give students the language to discuss theories and virtues.

1. Students learn what virtues enable you to do and what benefits are gained. They learn situations in which to practice this virtue, emotions that may arise calling for this virtue, and how to practice the virtue in different circumstances.
2. Students “build their own understanding of virtues ... and how best to exercise them in their lives” and “identify the virtues they need to cultivate in order to flourish once they enter the world of work” (Wright, 2014, p. 9).
3. Student should focus on issues which drive and spark a call to act virtuously ... how we bring our knowledge, reasoning and practice about virtues to specific issues that call for their exercise ... moving out from the moral agent to wider society” (Wright, 2014, p. 10).

If character education is happening within an explicitly “taught course,” how will that course be evaluated? Much of the true evaluation will happen while students are engaged in self-examination. Based on that self-examination, they can place themselves within the stages of moral development:

1. Open to building virtue, but not sure about some of it;
2. Committed, but get carried away;
3. Committed to practice, but don’t like doing it;
4. Committed to practice, want to do it, but don’t know why;
5. All of the preceding four, but they also know why (Wright, 2014, pp. 13-16).

In the virtue course that we taught at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, students who indicated that they were committed to practice, want to do it and know why increased from 15% at the beginning of the course to 60% at the end of the course. Of course, there are cautions regarding self-assessments due to the tendency we have to see ourselves better than we might be perceived by others. These cautions are important to take into consideration. We cannot simply assess virtue

by observation because a person's intentions are essential to determining whether someone is practicing virtue or not.

## Conclusion

Aquinas taught that living things seek the good and avoid the bad. Human beings, with an intellect, possess infused and acquired virtues. Our responses to situations can be shaped by reason. At times, we can experience a conflict when two or more virtues appear to come up against each other in a given situation. Practical wisdom, or prudence, can help us know the what, when and how in each circumstance. It works with both nature and grace. Virtues always support the common good, not just the individual good. Aquinas believed that moral self-improvement was ongoing in human life, a point on which he differs from Aristotle. For Aquinas, like De La Salle, the goal of life is eternal life (Vogler, 2017).

We can, therefore, by means of character education, help form models of virtue who can move on from our campuses to inspire and attract others to the virtuous life they see witnessed in our graduates.

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## Endnotes

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2. The first two instances in which a listing by De La Salle of these twelve virtues were found in *Collection of Various Short Treatises* (1711) and in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* (1720).