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## Assessing University Character Education with Community: A Humanities Perspective

Nicola M. Imbracsio, PhD<sup>1</sup>

Recently, Avi Kak, professor of electrical and computer engineering wrote a letter to the editor of the *Exponent*, the newspaper of Purdue University, titled "Why Our English Department Deserves More Respect." He concluded:

It goes without saying that much of STEM is about solving problems in the service of humanity. However, if as a student you are severely lacking in the more humanistic aspects of your education, it's going to be difficult for you to construct mental narratives (let alone spoken and written narratives) about where you would want to go with what you know today, about the directions in which you would want to push the current state of the knowledge. What's worse, if the humanistic side of your education did not inculcate in you a broader sense of the values in life, your thinking is likely to be dominated by your baser instincts, such as those for just profit and dominance.

But, how does one become "inculcated with a broader sense of the values in life"? And how do such values assist us in combating the "baser instincts" of greed and power? Looking beyond the individual student's exposure to the "broader sense of values in life," philosopher and dean of arts and letters at Michigan State University, Christopher Long asserts that the "virtues" of the humanities – or liberal arts – do more than benefit the person; they also strengthen democratic society:

... to practice the arts of liberty well, we need to cultivate the *virtues* of the liberal arts: the ability to communicate with eloquence, embrace diversity with grace, perceive globally with imagination, and respond to complexity with nuance. The challenge of [higher education] is to teach these virtues at scale, recognizing that our communities are enriched when citizens embody the virtues of the arts of liberty.

But how does a student learn to "embrace diversity with grace" within a class, a semester, or even through four years of undergraduate education? How do we know if, as instructors, we are truly achieving these vital, yet overwhelming, goals in the classroom?

Working in assessment, I am often told that such "ineffable qualities" as those stated by Kak and Long are impossible to assess. Anderson (2002) and Bers, Davis, and Taylor (2000) claim that measuring learning goals in the humanities – like critical discernment, integrated reasoning, or ethical inquiry – are more difficult than in other academic areas because of their abstract nature. The same can be said of character education.<sup>2</sup> As James Arthur states in his introduction to this issue of the journal, "Character is about who we are and who we can become. It is not a fixed set of easily measured traits incapable of modification." Yet, if we cannot measure such ineffable qualities such as character, virtue, ethical imagination, or empathy, then how can we know if we are effectively teaching them? We tend to make informal assessments by observing the character

(or lack of character) of our friends, family members, and public figures on a daily basis. But is formal, empirical assessment of character also possible?

### **Approaching Character Assessment from a Humanities Perspective**

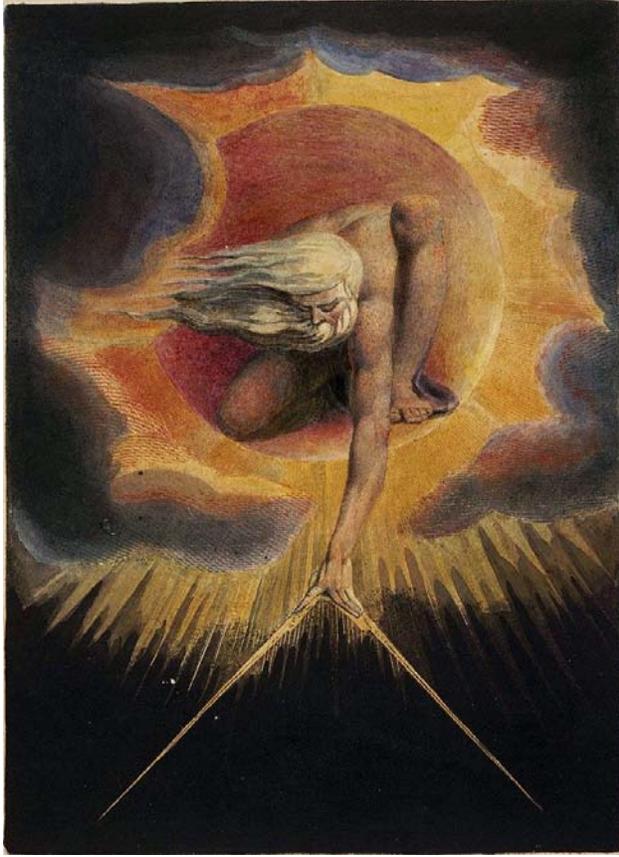
I believe that formal, empirical assessment of character education is possible. Before I discuss my suggested methods for assessing character, I want to clarify my approach to assessment in general, which is largely inspired by my own training in the humanities as a professor of English Literature turned assessment professional. In this role, I am often met with the resistance of other academics, who claim that true learning is impossible to assess because it is impossible to capture and that trying to collect such evidence of learning could destroy the art of teaching.

This attitude is illustrated most clearly in a scene from Alan Bennett's play, *The History Boys*, which is about a group of teachers preparing a class for the Oxford/ Cambridge entrance exams. At stake in the play is not only what teachers teach – but how they teach it, as the play pits various teachers (and their pedagogical approaches) against one another. At one point, the ambitious headmaster attempts to articulate the approach of the unorthodox methods of one beloved teacher (Hector):

Shall I tell you what is wrong with Hector as a teacher? It isn't that he doesn't produce results. He does. But they are unpredictable and unquantifiable and in the current educational climate that is no use. He may well be doing his job, but there is no method that I know of that enables me to assess the job that he is doing. There is inspiration, certainly, but how do I quantify that?

Here, “inspiration” and the “results” of that inspirational teaching approach are in contrast with “quantifiable” and “useful.” But I argue that the inspirational and the assessable are not always opposed and can be complementary; the inspirational need not be “unpredictable,” just as the assessable need not be reductive.

My assessment philosophy is often met with skepticism because some academics, like the headmaster from *History Boys*, have very different ideas of what assessment is than I do. For some, assessment is like the figure of Urizen from the English poet William Blake's complex personal mythology. Urizen is depicted in one of Blake's most celebrated designs – he is an old man leaning out from a golden orb, his long, white beard blown by the storm winds of the dark, unformed void. He reaches down with an outstretched compass to measure the solid world below.<sup>3</sup>



While Blake's Urizen can create, it is through "abstracting, dividing, and only then by becoming blind to what he is creating from" – the golden orb behind him (Higgs, 2021). For Blake, Urizen is the personification of obsessive Reason, a representation of the rationalist and materialist philosophy of the artist's Enlightenment Age, which, according to Blake, corrupts humanity's natural ability (divinely given) to see things in their true essence. So, in his attempt to compass the void, Urizen tries to measure and constrain the infinite. Learning assessment in higher education, as a field operating in the traditions of Reason, created the conditions under which academics are bound to approach assessment as a Urizen. Endeavors designed to measure ineffable qualities in order to quantify them and, thereby, destroy their generative nature becoming limiting and repressive. Or, even worse, assessment to some means ignoring these sublime qualities all together in order to focus on what is truly measurable – finite, predictable data.

As I see it, assessment of ineffable qualities, especially a quality as important as character, provides an opportunity to challenge ourselves to resist the Urizen-nature of traditional assessment practices that attempt to quantify the unquantifiable, and instead focus on methods for measuring what truly matters in our classrooms and communities. We can only do this if we change *how* we measure character and virtue. Indeed, we need not change *what* we measure. As the headmaster from *The History Boys* says, "there is no method that I know of that enables me to assess the job that he is doing" – my suggestion would be to *change the method*, which is what I set out here. In order to encourage that change, I invite those who are apprehensive about assessing character (or any such nuanced outcome) to remember that "assessment" comes from the Latin verb "*assidere*," which means "to sit with." This word origin implies that engaging in assessment means that the instructor sits *with* the learner; assessment is something instructors do *with* students, not *to* students. It is this collaborative, community-informed approach that I propose for assessing character education.

### **The Value of Assessing Character via Community: Flourishing of Self and Others**

According to VanderWeele, there are a few reasons why character assessment is so important, including ascertaining programmatic effectiveness, and guiding future character programs. In addition to these, VanderWeele notes the importance of character assessment to "promote character formation, which may in turn lead to improvement in various other aspects of health and welling, of flourishing" (p. 2). He elaborates that, "The empirical assessment of character can help enliven and promote discussions around character and its importance in daily life" (p. 2). In other

words, an understanding of how character affects other aspects of wellbeing – such as health, relationships, and a sense of purpose or meaning – may in turn convince others of the importance of character and studying character formation. I add to this list of justifications for assessing character the need to ascertain the impact of character on community.

In the classical understanding, good character or virtue was thought not only to contribute to personal wellbeing, but to comprise the essential basis of well-being (Aristotle, 1980; Plato, 1992). Living a virtuous life was sought for its own sake. One of the many contemporary criticisms of character education is its tendency to focus on individual growth and progress without addressing societal influences and challenges to such growth (Kristjansson, 2013). However, we must remember that Aristotle himself believed that the “good life” was only possible in the community of society. Therefore, we must consider that character shapes not only one’s own well-being, but also that of others. There is experimental evidence that acts of goodwill can have social “spillover” that encourages others to similarly act altruistically (Fowler & Christakis, 2010; VanderWeele & Christakis, 2019; Foot, 2003). If virtue promotes the well-being of others and the common good, it is ethically imperative for us to engage in the assessment of character formation in order to understand and articulate the contribution that character can have on the flourishing of both the individual and community.

## **How to Assess Character: Beyond Self-Report**

### *Indirect Assessments of Character*

The most obvious challenge of assessing character is that most attempts to do so involve indirect assessments (i.e., the self-report). Obviously, our capacity to authentically and honestly assess ourselves – especially our character – is limited by a number of factors, which often lead to either an inflated view of our goodness or an equally hyperbolic dismissal of our virtues. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is no benefit of self-reflection or that self-evaluations are meaningless. Participants in character surveys will often reflect on their own lives, and such reflection may motivate change to improve character. Scholars have outlined several approaches assessors can take that may mitigate the biases of the self-report (VanderWeele, 2021; Wright et al., 2020).

The self-reporting nature of character assessments most often has a built-in self-centeredness (VanderWeele, 2021; Wright et al., 2020). Drawing upon current social science research practices that attempt to measure psychometrics in longitudinal studies, standard character assessments often collect data on a cohort of individuals over time. Outcomes on those unique individuals are assessed, but they are not assessed on other individuals in that person’s community. In other words, most character assessments aim to assess the impact of one’s behavior on oneself – but not others. One way to change this method would be to assess outcome data on members of an individual’s community – family, friends, coworkers, and classmates – along with the self-assessment instruments. Since research indicates that self-assessed and other-assessed responses to a person’s character are often surprisingly strongly correlated (Fowers, 2014; Helzer et al., 2014; Vazir, 2010; Vazire and Mehl, 2008), such assessments (when correlated with the self-report) could lead to a better understanding of individual character growth and progress. This approach to character assessment could potentially provide data yet to be captured on the effects of character on promoting community wellbeing.

Along with using others to assess character outcomes, self-reporting instruments could be revised to shift the endemic “self-centered” focus. For example, rather than a respondent being asked to report upon their expressions of specific aspects of character, such as “perseverance” or gratitude,” respondents might be asked to state what others would say about them. This approach may result in a somewhat more objective self-assessment in that it helps respondents take the perspective of others (itself, a virtue). Asking the same question for various “levels” of intimacy (parent, sibling, close friend, spouse, coworker, classmate, etc.) would help excavate the nuanced layers of character that manifest over time and in relationship to others.

### *Direct Assessments of Character*

While the most common assessments of character involve indirect assessments, there are also direct assessments of character that can be performed to either support or challenge self-reporting character assessment. For example, collecting information on an individual’s charitable giving, volunteering, or civic engagement could provide additional data on how the individual’s character impacts their community. While this data collection is simple enough, there are other more exciting methods of direct character assessment.

One method of direct assessment that is often underused is role-playing activities or constructed scenarios, where character can be assessed directly through outside observation of the participant’s behaviors.<sup>1</sup> While there is scant literature on role-playing assessment in character education, simulations are commonly used in social work and nursing training. Role-playing scenarios that invite students to act in reaction to complex ethical quandaries allow not only for instructor/facilitator assessment of a student, but also provide space for peer-to-peer assessment, thereby gaining a sense of community impact of character development. Such scenarios can also be administered by presenting students with constructed situations for them to engage with – clips from a film, or excerpts from fiction – that ask them to use their ethical imaginations, practice moral wisdom, or evaluate others’ characters, drawing upon their own understandings of virtues.

One drawback of these role-playing, constructed scenarios is that they often involve high-stakes, exceptional situations. Conversations (both classical and contemporary) around character and moral behavior point to how “living a moral, constructive life is defined by a weighted sum of countless individual, morally relevant behaviors enacted day in and day out” not just a single, defining, moment (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek 2007). So how does one assess and measure these everyday moral behaviors? One innovative study uses Electronically Activated Recorders (EAR) – a digital audio-recorder that intermittently samples snippets of ambient sounds from people’s environments – and examines the consistency and stability of these moral behaviors (Bollich et al. 2016). In this study, participants wore an EAR over one or two weekends. Audio files were coded for everyday moral behaviors (e.g., showing sympathy, gratitude) and morally-neutral comparison language behaviors (e.g., use of prepositions, articles). Results indicate that stable individual differences in moral behavior can be systematically observed in daily life.

While this study cannot necessarily be replicated widely, the results can be applied in other ways: recording conversations before class begins, or during small group discussion. More importantly, by bringing the study of morality into the real world where moral behaviors naturally occur, this study inspires questions that can be asked of our other assessment approaches, such as: do moral

behaviors alter as they occur across different settings (home, work, social interactions)? Is there a cross-situational consistency of moral behaviors for certain individuals and not for others? How can our current assessments of character – especially when situated within a community – speak to the diverse social contexts that people inhabit? While the Bollich study focuses on the recorded audio of the study participants, there is no coding of others who are in relationship with the study participants. In other words, how do specific words of praise, gratitude, or affection impact others within the community of the participant?

Each of these approaches to character assessment has advantages and disadvantages. They can be tedious and expensive to arrange and coordinate and difficult to repeatedly distribute over time. However, each of them potentially provides inspiration for others on how they may move forward within their own resources to innovate alternative assessments that use community to help supplement, support, or challenge self-reported character assessment. While there are numerous challenges in assessing character, it is important to face those challenges and navigate them because character itself is constitutive to both individual and community flourishing.

As this issue of *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* considers character education in theory and practice within higher education, there is an important need for assessment to be part of that conversation. We measure what we value, even if its value exceeds what we can measure. This is because what we measure influences what we discuss, what we study, what we aim for, and the policies we put in place. However, if what we value is seemingly impossible to measure, we should not change *what* we are measuring – we should change *how* we are measuring it. In this way, the very act of assessing character through community can encourage future discussions on the role and importance of character for both individuals and society. Rather than taking the approach of Blake’s Urizen – attempting to measure and contain the ineffable with tools of reason – perhaps instead we should be inspired by Blake’s own “two-fold vision.” As a poetic mystic, Blake was opposed to the scientific mode of passive, supposedly objective, observation of the world. He thought such a myopic approach self-fulfilling – what he called the “single vision”: we see what we expect to see. He understood implicit bias before there was a name for it: “A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees.”<sup>4</sup> Blake encouraged others to attempt to view things using a “double-vision,” using both their inner (objective) and outward (creative) vision:

For double the vision my Eyes do see  
And a double vision is always with me  
With my inward Eye ‘tis an old Man grey  
With my outward a Thistle across my way.<sup>5</sup>

For Blake, humans have a capacity to use their imagination to see things in their true essence, and this power of imagination is a divine quality by which God manifests himself in humans. It is this double-vision – this new way of looking – that I assert as an integral part for developing innovative and responsive assessment instruments that allow us to see the “true essence” of the often-ineffable work in character education.

And twofold Always, May God us keep  
From Single vision & Newtons sleep.<sup>6</sup>

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## Endnotes

1. Nicola M. Imbrascio is the Director Curriculum and Assessment at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, overseeing curriculum development and assessment of student learning in both undergraduate and graduate programs. She works with individual programs to create new curriculum, reinvigorate current curriculum, and engage in assessment and program review. Prior to coming to Saint Mary's, Nicola was the Assessment Director for Integrated Studies in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University—the R1's integrated general education program—where she administered the program, supporting faculty development, assessment, and curriculum development. She also taught within the program, offering interdisciplinary humanities courses spanning topics such as the plague, witchcraft, and fairytales. She holds her Ph.D. in English literature (specifically, Early Modern English Drama) from the University of New Hampshire and her MFA in Applied Theatre from Emerson College.

2. Understood as any moral education that emphasizes the cultivation of moral character and virtue.
3. Urizen, from *Europe a Prophecy*, copy D, object 1. British Museum. Public Domain.
4. The author has used several role-playing and gaming scenarios in her integrative Humanities courses to assess student expressions of effective collaboration and cultural understanding, as well as more complex outcomes such as ethical imagination and sense of justice.
5. William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.”
6. William Blake, “Poems from Letters [To Thomas Butts]: With Happiness stretch’d across the hills” (lines 26-30).
7. Ibid. lines 87-88.