



# Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

## **Developing Character through Rotationally Assigned Classroom Responsibilities**

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**Abstract:**

This paper outlines a classroom-management strategy using student-role-assignment to develop Moral, Civic and Performance Virtues alongside prosociality. The strategy is grounded in the evidence-based concepts that group membership fortifies character development and that communal ownership builds inclinations toward democratic/civic duty. It utilises a Character Caught pedagogy suitable for classroom-based subjects from Primary to Further Education, and uses expectations and community responsibility to generate experience of civic duty and students' sense of ownership of the learning-space, resulting in character development.

**Theoretical Basis:**

Humans find it easier to perform prosocial and virtuous actions in situations/contexts where they feel they "belong" (Althof and Berkowitz, 2006; Carr, 2006). Active participation in one's socio-political environment builds a sense of group-membership or citizenship which supports character development (Mulgan, 1990; Aristotle, 1992; Miller, 1995; Kraut, 2002; Cooper, 2010). One way for teachers to show trust in students, while also promoting respect/civic friendship among students, is to assign responsibilities (Curren, 2010; Peterson, 2018). Responsibility/role allocation has been demonstrated to develop respectfulness and responsibility in students (Lickona, 1991) and to have a positive impact on behaviour for learning (Watts *et al.*, 2021). Further, behavioural expectations without reward contribute to building intrinsic motivation (Warneken and Tomasello, 2008; Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010; Character.org, 2022). These theories are the basis for this Character Caught pedagogy.

**Scope:**

This method is suitable for Primary, Secondary and Further Education, across most classroom-based subjects. It works best if desks are arranged in clusters, with four/six students per table-group. Each table-group has a container of classroom stationery/equipment (coloured ballpoints – for self/peer marking and post-feedback editing, sharpener, rubber, etc).

**Method:**

This classroom organisation routine, with a small addition to the seating plan, can make classroom management simpler and present a year-long opportunity for Character Caught using classroom expectations/responsibilities (Bennett, 2017; Watts *et al.*, 2021). On the seating plan, create a colour code assigning each student a classroom role/job. The roles should include a “Subject Expert” and “Organiser” for each table (these do not need to be students who are enthusiastic “helpers” or adept at the subject); with other roles suitable for the classroom/subject assigned to all remaining students. It does not matter who is assigned which role as each half-term the roles are reassigned so that over the year every student has been the Organiser and Subject Expert for their table-group and has had between two and four of the other roles. Figure 1 shows an example seating plan with role assignments.

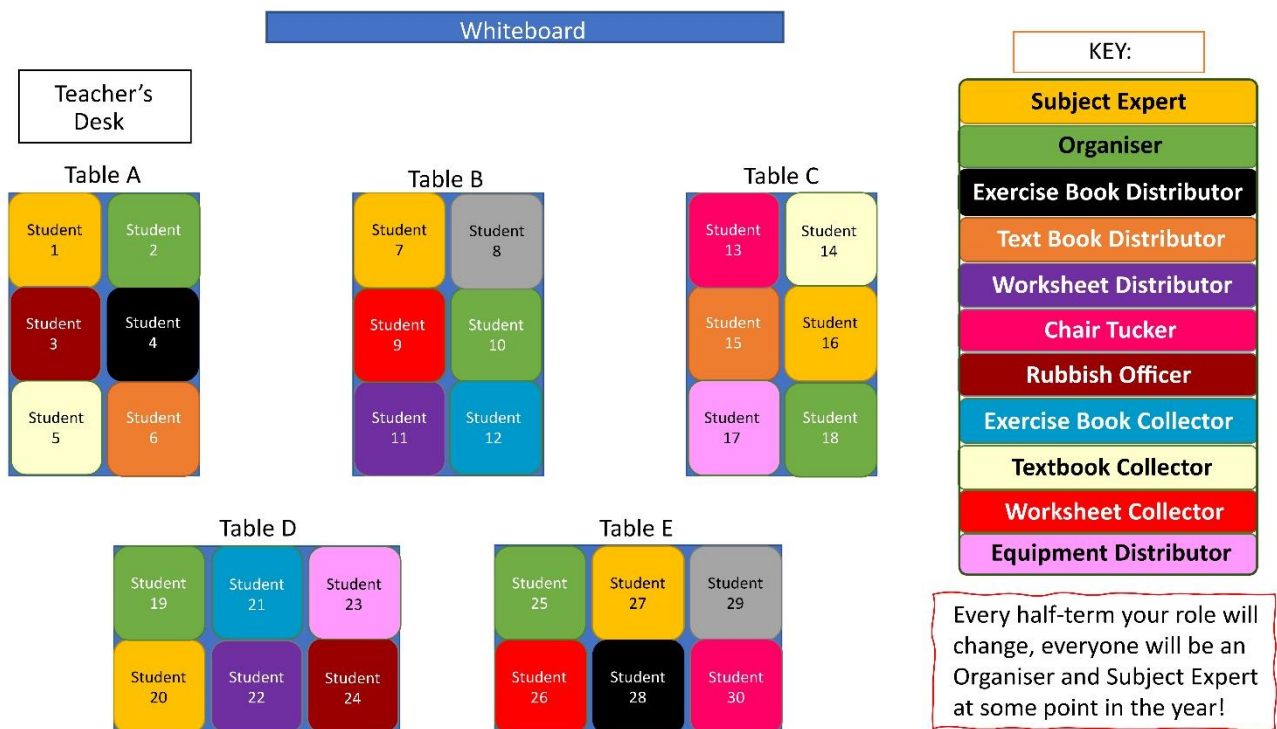


Figure 1: Example seating plan with colour-coded role-assignments

The Organisers’ responsibility is to ensure their table’s stationery is appropriately allocated throughout the lesson and is all returned at the end of lesson. The Subject Experts’ responsibility is to be the first port of call for any questions about the lesson (tasks or

content) from other students on their table. If their Expert is unable to help, a student may then raise their hand to ask the teacher. It is not expected that the Subject Expert will always be able to answer their table's questions, but in my experience a significant proportion of the questions asked by students could have been answered by a fellow student. The Distributors and Collectors jobs are self-explanatory; the teacher simply needs to tell the class who is required as they enter, for example, "Today we need the Exercise Book and Worksheet Distributors". The same again for Collectors towards the end of the lesson. Equipment may mean different things in different subjects/classrooms; some subjects will require more Equipment Distributors/Collectors than others. Chair Tuckers are to circulate the classroom at the close of the lesson to ensure all chairs are safely tucked in (or on desks at the end of the day if that is a cleaning requirement for their school). All students remain responsible for their own chairs, except those with other responsibilities at the end of lessons. Rubbish Officers are to go around the classroom during and/or at the end of the lesson to make sure any rubbish is collected into the bin. It is important to thank students for completing their roles, as acknowledgement and praise reinforces the positive feelings experienced during positive action (Lickona, 2018).

#### **How This Promotes Character Development:**

- Having responsibilities promotes a sense of community spirit and communal ownership in the classroom; it is *our* classroom, not *the teacher's* classroom.
- A 'caring community and positive social relationships' (Berkowitz and Bier, 2007, p. 41) alongside a clean and safe environment enable more effective character development (Benninga *et al.*, 2003).
- All students having assigned roles builds appreciation/respect for a job well done (Gardner, 1984; Noddings, 2015).
- Being an Organiser develops honesty and attentiveness (making sure all items are appropriately issued and returned), teamwork (sharing and assigning stationery) and communication skills (talking with their peers to ensure all stationery is returned, listening to the teacher so they know what is required when).
- Being a Subject Expert builds self-confidence (realising they know more than they thought, discovering they can positively affect their peers' learning experience),

leadership skills (taking a coordinator-style role), helpfulness with compassion (through not teasing peers for asking questions) and assertiveness (trusting in their answers), as well as improving academic diligence and skill (it is often said that the best way to learn something is to teach it).

- Being a Chair Tucker or Rubbish Officer builds humility (these do not feel like important or respectable roles to many students, especially when the system is first introduced), community pride (having a sense of ownership over the physical learning environment), respect (towards peers, teachers, and cleaners) and awareness of the physical environment (in terms of safety and orderliness).
- Having regular responsibilities which are not rewarded, just expected, increases students' intrinsic motivation (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2010) and sense of communal accountability, fortifying students' civic-mindedness (Peterson, 2020).
- Each role, and every student having a job, leads to development of various Moral, Civic and Performance Virtues class-wide. Experts also improve upon some Intellectual Virtues.

### **Classroom Benefits:**

Within a few weeks of implementing this strategy several things can change/improve.

1. Fewer instances of disruptive behaviour at the open and close of lessons.
2. Shyer students become more outspoken and confident.
3. Lessons begin more smoothly and quickly (allowing more teaching time).
4. Previously challenging/disruptive students become less so overall.
5. The classroom is cleaner and tidier.
6. Students tease each other less frequently for giving incorrect answers or asking "stupid" questions. There are far fewer instances of bullying of any kind during lessons, which I believe results from a growing communal spirit and increased class-wide compassion (Coopersmith, 1967; Staub, 1979).
7. More students contribute to class discussions and/or raise their hands to answer/ask questions about the topic or task. I attribute this to increased self-esteem and confidence, and decreased fear of ridicule from peers (Lickona, 1991).

8. Students thank each other for completing their roles and demonstrate more gratitude generally.
9. The teacher awards significantly more merits/commendations than before, usually for unrequested helpful or kind behaviours.

Many of these changes follow existing research demonstrating the positive behavioural impacts of character education (e.g., Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Weber and Ruch, 2012; Wagner and Ruch, 2015; Diggs and Akos, 2016; Jeynes, 2017; Ellis and Tod, 2018).

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