



# Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

**Great Artworks Can Help Students (and Teachers) to Flourish and Become Heroes of Their Own Life Story.**

Miroslava Duranková

*Co-founder and Director of Great Works Academy*

*Collegium of Anton Neuwirth*

## **Abstract**

This paper demonstrates results and good case practices of Great Works Academy – an extra-curricular program (character sought) which aims to inspire students' desire for virtuous life by creating time and space for relationships (character caught) to evolve in conversations about important life questions that emerge from great stories in books, art, music and movies (character taught). This unique combination of narratives explored in an atmosphere of trust helps the participants not just to survive amid modern challenges and adversity, but to flourish.

**Key words:** art, stories, flourishing, defining issue test, relationships, moral imagination, schooling of desire, students' and teachers' character development

## **Introduction**

Great Works Academy is an extra-curricular program for middle and high school teachers and their students. Great Works Academy aims to inspire students' desire for virtuous life and enable them to better understand themselves and the world to become heroes of their own story. Trained teachers run the clubs during the whole academic year. Every club has 7 - 15 students, which meet weekly for 90 minute discussion seminars. Every seminar is dedicated to one story portrayed in paintings, movies, musical pieces or literature (great works).

There are three main ways of cultivating virtues of character explained through the typology: character caught, taught and sought (Jubilee Centre, 2022). Great Works Academy mostly uses the character taught approach, although there are elements of character caught and sought incorporated in the program as well. That is what makes the program unique.

## **Character Taught**

“Character can be taught through the curriculum using teaching and learning strategies, activities and resources” (Jubilee Centre, 2022). The Academy uses outstanding stories of Western civilization which open important life questions in the process of moderated debates where everybody is encouraged to seek their own opinion. In this way, we develop character through hero examples whose behavior we imitate or judge to be unpleasant and want to avoid. The stories offer the moral dilemmas that we learn to solve in a safe environment. Within the process we ask ourselves how would we behave in a similar situation. The beauty of the stories and characters (or conversely their repulsive vices) “schools our desires” (Bohlin, 2005). By honestly examining the work and its details, we learn to concentrate, to read and see with comprehension and to think critically – this enables us to better understand the reality in which we make everyday choices. The process invites us to practice practical wisdom which, along with the well schooled desire, can help us overcome the challenge of character education – the 'gappiness problem' (Kristjánsson *et al.*, 2020).

The key point here is to avoid instrumentalizing the great work just for the sake of moral discussion and character development, but to value both – the beauty of the great work itself and its unique contribution to our culture, as well as the richness of activities and discussions for character development. That's why an equal amount of time during the seminar needs to be dedicated to both of them.

Although the information about the great work, its author and the context might be important, we put more emphasis on direct experience of the work – reliving the story again. Students need to perceive the work, explore it and ultimately empathize with the motivations, emotions and conflicts, the method called by Cana Academy “teaching fiction from the inside out” (2016).

## **Character Sought**

The program operates in the school environment, but it is extra-curricular. Students have to apply for it, give an extra effort and time to study and also participate by paying a fee. As

this is a chosen experience, participants are more engaged in the educational process and beyond.

“Character sought involves the desire to discern and freely pursue one’s own character development. It involves reflection and ultimately planning and setting one’s own character commitments...” (Jubilee Centre, 2022). The most challenging part of it for the student is making a commitment and keeping it. Several things are crucial in this respect: the first one is the students’ relationship with the teacher who is promoting the program, and second one is a demonstration class, thanks to which students can understand and imagine the educational process. Later on, students are motivated by the participation of other classmates and the vision of improving their own communication skills and expressing their opinions.

The longer the students are in the program, the more they are committed to continue and – as they are not motivated by evaluation or other instrumentalizing tools – the purer is the beauty of the learning itself.

### **Character Caught**

The most influential parts of the program for students are teachers (95%), discussions (94%), the stories in literature (93%), the combination of genres (87%) and students (85%), which underscore the importance of relationships - they are together with positive school community and clear ethos important for character caught (Jubilee Centre, 2022).

We are most changed through our relationships: we are moved by those who are close to us (Berkowitz, 2021). Students spend long periods of time in discussions within their club, which allows them to build deep and real relationships with their classmates (and teacher). Moreover, we strive to create an atmosphere of trust and respect among the pupils and between the teacher and the pupils. At the beginning of the year we agree on rules laid down by students themselves, for example: we listen to each other, we respect each other's opinion.

Teachers show respect to students by open-ended and non-suggestive questions. They don't force them to talk if they don't want to and teachers do not evaluate students' opinions. Teachers report improvements of relationships with students which also have an impact on other compulsory subjects taught by them. They also testify that they “finally teach as they always wanted to”.

## Goals and Results

Since the very beginning of the program (2019) we have measured students' progress in their character development, ability to focus, improvement in their reading comprehension as well as critical thinking. We use a mixed methodology with both qualitative and quantitative measures. Students complete self-evaluation questionnaires, tests of reading comprehension (SCIO - National comparative examinations) and Defining Issue Tests (Rest, 1974).

49% of students claim they focus better and 74% say they are better listeners and interrupt others less while speaking. Students have improved their reading comprehension score by 4,9 points, which is 4,7 points better than students who took the test when applying for universities. The results of the critical thinking test showed that, on average, students have improved 9 times more than what is the general average of a successful intervention.

In students' character development we aim to educate their desire for better things in their lives - what Bohlin (2005) calls the “schooling of desire”, which “*depends on the development of a well-exercised moral imagination.*” The evaluation of teachers coincides with students' self-evaluation:

- 74% of students say they have improved their ability to see and understand different perspectives;
- 50% of students say they have opened up new life perspectives and ways of thinking;
- 66% of students perceive an improvement in the empathy and understanding of others;
- 62% of students perceive they better judge themselves, situations and others.

Each year we receive this kind of message from students: *"Your program is the only thing that brought me hope and kept me alive during the year. For weeks I did not get out of the house, felt depressed, angry... Academy was the only thing I looked forward to. I slowly recovered from emptiness and resignation. One habit led to another. I started to play the piano again, to write poems and to draw. Thanks to the Academy, I discovered art is important to me, to expressing what I have inside me, what I am experiencing. To live."*

It gives us hope and inspiration to continue in our vision of 'characterful young people yearning for wisdom and beauty'.

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