



# Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

## **Applying Ethical Dilemmas and Reflective Journaling to Support Character Growth in Educators**

Owen Griffith

*Western Governors University*

*Learning without reflection is a waste. Reflection without learning is dangerous*

- Confucius

*We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience*

- John Dewey

This paper illustrates how educators can be encouraged to utilize ethical dilemmas and reflective journaling to develop their practical wisdom and become exemplars of character. Utilization of ethical dilemmas and reflective journaling may effectively support character growth in educators, which in turn may help them build the whole student and empower better citizens for the future of flourishing communities. Dilemmas can be powerful tools help introduce ethics in education and provide methods to apply discussions of character education and help to inform successful character-driven decisions. As Bohlin writes, “School leaders are called to adjudicate competing goods and teach others to do the same” (Bohlin, 2021, p. 158).

### **A Sample Ethical Dilemma**

Here is a sample ethical dilemma that could be utilized. In addition, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues has [resources](#), videos, and sample ethical dilemmas to help generate a dilemma to fit your school’s situation.

*A science teacher has a football player in their class. The school adheres to very strict academic requirements for athletes. The athlete is showing considerable effort in the class but failed the mid-term, bringing the student below the required grade. The student has a scholarship waiting at a prominent university and would be the first person in their family to go to college. The educator knows that the scholarship would probably be the only way this student would be able to attend college. If the teacher enters the grade the student received on the mid-term, the student will be ineligible to play the second half of the season, putting the scholarship in jeopardy. What should the teacher do?*

After everyone has read the dilemma, individual educators should reflect personally and then explore the dilemma deeper with a group to increase their capacity to apply the

reflection to their teaching and build their character. To delve deeper into a reflective aspect of this process, educators should be encouraged to openly discuss their ideas and responses to the dilemma in a small group. A few questions that may stimulate deeper reflection include:

1. Which character virtues were present?
2. Which of those virtues were in conflict?
3. Have you encountered a similar situation?
4. Which character virtues may be employed in your solution?

When reflecting on these four steps, the second step is especially important, as teachers may begin to develop their practical wisdom, or phronesis, through adjudication of competing virtues. This can be seen in the following graphic from the *Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools* (2022), to help participants understand how virtues work in relation to each other and to contribute to phronesis. A copy of the entire framework may be given to the educators and time allotted to read and absorb it, as it will be a useful guide in building the skill of reflection relating to their professional identity and personal virtues.

### THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF CHARACTER



After sufficient time is given to small group work, educators may move to a larger group, further developing and refining their ideas, sharing, and learning from others as they

explore the dilemma and possible solutions. Participants should be reminded that there are no right or wrong answers, but that it is more important to focus on the process, realizing that how they develop their response may be more important than the final answer. This process will allow time for teachers to develop their reflective practice pertaining to the moral dilemma and to focus on the growth gained from the exploration of the dilemma.

For example, when given the above ethical dilemma, one group identified option A, being honest and failing the student. Another group identified option B, showing compassion, and passing the student so they can go to college. Oftentimes, in the group work, educators may further identify an option C, which creatively finds a way to use practical wisdom, implementing phronesis as they reason why those first two solutions were not good enough. Option C offers the student tutoring and re-taking the test, but first making sure that this is in line with the school's academic policy. This shows that, when working on character, together we can sometimes come up with solutions we would not see individually and empower our own character development and the development of others. This might be called "collective phronesis" and is indeed incredibly powerful when a school can support and cultivate this, but it does take providing the necessary training and support.

### **Reflective Journaling**

To build upon critical reflection through dialogue, educators may utilize learning journals or reflective diaries to grow as teachers of character. Reflection on what it means to be a virtuous practitioner can inform and give direction to educators both personally and professionally, allowing them to become exemplars of character to students. Writing a reflective journal can help further develop self-reflection, integrate theory, practice, and gain deeper insight into any given situation (Bean, 1996).

Moon (2006) outlines four compelling reasons to utilize reflective diaries.

1. To provide space for educators to think and focus on their journeys
2. To promote reflection, encouraging deep learning, and gaining insight into their character as well as professional growth
3. To develop metacognition, which empowers clearer reflection on developing the skills of teaching and being an educator of character

#### 4. To enhance learning and growth

An important aspect of a reflective diary is guided reflection. Once teachers have initially started reflective journaling, they may be given prompts pertaining to character, such as asking what virtues are important to becoming a successful educator. At this point in the process, teachers may be given a mentor, who is a veteran teacher or school leader. The mentor may revisit and check in throughout the school year, going over the reflective journal, giving new exercises, helping work through any problems, and celebrating the growth.

#### References

Bean, J. (1996) *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Bohlin, K. (2021) 'The Practical Wisdom Framework: A Compass for School Leaders', *Journal of Education*, 202(2), pp. 156–165.

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