



Teaching Character: A Practical Guide

Enhancing Virtue Literacy for Promoting Critical Reflection in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program

Paul Wright

*Head of Positive Education and Head of Psychology,
Taipei European School*

Introduction:

The purpose of this essay is to present a pedagogical approach to Character Education, which involves activities aimed at cultivating virtue literacy and critical reflection among students enrolled in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP). The activities are grounded in the fundamental principles of the neo-Aristotelian model, which asserts that virtues are indispensable for achieving human flourishing (Arthur, Fullard and O’Leary, 2022, p. 8), and that reflective learning is a process that allows students to contemplate their virtues through critical reflection (Arthur, Fullard and O’Leary, 2022, p. 31). The activities adopt a "caught" approach to teaching, which emphasises the use of virtue language and encourages the practice of virtues in real-life situations through the “sought approach” (Arthur, Fullard and O’Leary, 2022). Although virtue literacy has been identified as a rarely employed teaching and learning strategy by educators (Arthur, Fullard and O’Leary, 2022), developing students' virtue literacy can improve personal reflection, as it has been demonstrated to enhance their ability to apply virtue reasoning in diverse scenarios, including those that involve ethical considerations (Harrison, Burn and Moller, 2018).

Background:

As an integral part of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IBDP), students are required to fulfil the Creativity, Action, and Service (CAS) component, which provides opportunities for experiential learning. It is mandatory for students to reflect on their CAS experiences to meet the requirements of this program.

Challenge:

Traditionally, students' reflections have been based on the schools CAS handbook that includes a model to aid their written reflections. This model identifies four elements: 1. describing what happened, including obstacles and successes; 2. expressing feelings; 3. generating ideas, rethinking, and re-examining choices and actions; and 4. asking questions. However, students find reflecting challenging beyond a description of their experience. Research suggests that it is often assumed that students can make meaningful reflections rather than being taught or modelled (Arthur *et al.*, 2014).

Solution:

Facilitating the learning of the "Building Blocks of Character" (Intellectual, Moral, Civic, and

Performance) (Jubilee Centre, 2022) and the "Components of Virtue" (A. Virtue Perception, B. Virtue Knowledge and Understanding, C. Virtue Emotion, and F. Virtue Reasoning) (Jubilee Centre, 2022) may complement the CAS reflection model, enhance students' virtue literacy, and improve critical reflection.

CAS Handbook Elements	Components of Virtue
1. Describe what happened	A. Noticing situations involving or standing in need of virtues B. Understanding the virtue and why it is important
2. Expressing feelings	C. Feeling the right virtue-relevant emotion in the right situation in the right way
3. Generating ideas 4. Asking questions	F. Discernment and deliberative action about virtues, including in situations where virtues conflict or collide

CAS Experience and Virtue Literacy:

For a service CAS experience, a student organised a local beach cleanup, but the reflections were largely descriptive. The use of virtue literacy would have supported the student in deepening their reflections. For example, the student could have used the intellectual building block to support their judgment in determining the best course of action to achieve the goal of a cleaner beach. They could have used the civic building block to raise awareness in the local community, and the moral building block and the virtue of compassion to highlight the potential impact of litter on tourism and marine life. The performance virtue building block would have come into play during the process of organising and participating in the beach cleanup. The student could have developed their critical reflection by using the components of virtue to reflect on the application of relevant virtues throughout the experience. Critical reflection can be more effective when taking place before, during, and after the experience (Arthur, Fullard and O’Leary, 2022).

Practical method:

Activities were designed and integrated into the usual CAS reflection writing session to encourage students to reflect on their CAS experiences from a virtue perspective. The first activity involved using online flashcards created in Quizlet to learn the names of the four building blocks of character, the definitions of the components of virtue, and examples of related virtues. The second activity was designed to model the difference between non-virtue and virtue-focused reflections. Students were shown several alumni CAS reflections and, in small groups, had to identify elements from the CAS model, as well as any virtue components and virtues the reflection exemplified.

After gathering feedback from the task, students were presented with the same reflections, but this time written from a virtue perspective. The groups were asked to report back to the whole group any building blocks of character, components of virtues, and virtues they could identify and justify. Any discrepancies between the groups were discussed.

The final activity was for students to review their own past and current CAS reflections and make any necessary edits to imbue virtues. This activity was designed to encourage students to use a virtue perspective for future CAS experiences to deepen their personal reflections.

Positive findings:

To assess the impact of the lesson, data were collected through a self-report (Google form), a discussion board (Padlet), and a content analysis of pre- and post-CAS reflections. Process data were gathered through a focus group that harnessed students' views of the activities. Results from the Google form indicated that virtue perception improved and was consistent with the data from the content analysis. Process data showed positive feedback indicating that the activities were beneficial in enhancing virtue perception and motivating students to utilise virtue literacy.

Recommendations:

According to insights gathered from the Padlet and focus group, it was recommended that a series of initial CAS sessions should incorporate similar activities that delve more deeply into the various aspects of virtues, particularly the virtue emotion, and involve more extensive modelling, practice, and feedback. It was further suggested that these sessions should be regularly scheduled to enable students to discuss and reflect on their use of virtues. These

findings align with the notion that students are generally not being supported to carry out sustained periods of reflection on their character, and would benefit from doing so (Arthur, 2010).

References:

Arthur, J. (2010). *Of Good Character; Exploration of Virtues and Values in 3–25-year-olds*, Exeter: Imprint Academic.

Arthur, J., Fullard, M. and O’Leary, C. (2022). *Teaching Character Education: What Works Research Study*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, [Online], Available at:

https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Research%20Reports/TeachingCharacterEducation_WhatWorks_ResearchReport.pdf [Accessed: 08 May 2023]

Arthur, J., Harrison, T., Kristjánsson, K., Hayes, D. and Higgins, J. (2014). *My Character Enhancing Future-Mindedness in Young People*. [Online] The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. Available at: <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/1575/projects/previous-work/my-character> [Accessed: 08 May 2023]

Harrison, T., Burn, E. and Moller, F. (2018). Teaching character; cultivating virtue perception and virtue reasoning through the curriculum. *Educational Review*, pp.1–18.

Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. (2022). *The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools*, Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, [Online], Available at:

<https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/527/character-education/framework> [Accessed: 08 May 2023]