

Using Culture as a Teaching Tool for Character Education

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Albert Einstein once said, “Not everything that counts can be measured and not everything that can be measured, counts.” Virtue or “character” can be defined as “goodness,” and behaving according to certain ethical principles. In order to truly assess such a vast and nebulous construct, we must first create a culture within our schools whereby all constituents collaboratively work to define, discuss, grapple with, model, and grow with increasing clarity towards our “better selves.” This work, critical for student success, must be purposeful, integrated, ongoing, comprehensive, valued, and reflective. Hawken Middle School, an independent day school in Cleveland, Ohio, USA, exemplifies character education programming that leans into culture as a teaching tool.

Sociologically, we might define “culture” as a collective set of beliefs and expectations, or a particular way of thinking and behaving. While this explanation provides us with an intellectual frame for understanding the abstract concept of culture, it does not truly get at the heart of its importance or influence on one’s education, and particularly one’s *character* education. In fact, a biologist’s definition might be more applicable as one might define “culture” as a set of conditions suitable for *growth*. Certainly, a healthy school culture can greatly contribute to one’s growth as a student and as a human being, but culture itself is not something that simply exists on its own. It is both a tool and a purpose, and as such, can be used to shape, form, and guide; however it is also malleable, adaptable, and ever-changing. Its power is in its reciprocity—a school’s culture evolves as a result of the individuals who are a part of it, and the individuals are changed as a result of the culture in which they learn and grow.

Albert Bandura’s *Social Learning Theory* highlights the influence of observational learning, the power of modeling, and the importance of our environment. In schools, the first step to capitalizing on culture as a teaching tool is to create purpose in everything we do. If we apply Bandura’s work, we understand that students are learning through observation, and taking in all that happens within their school community. As educators, it is critical that we raise our collective awareness and attend to the “little things” that help shape and sustain our school culture, beginning with our mission and core values.

A school’s mission makes explicit its purpose and core beliefs. When understood and embraced by all, it becomes foundational to institutional work, including character education. At Hawken, our mission states, “*Forward-focused preparation for the real world through the development of character and intellect.*” Not only does our mission affirm our purpose for existence as an independent school (forward-focused preparation for the real world) but it also outlines two of our core values (character and intellect). Moreso, our full mission expands on the aforementioned purpose to include our promise and ten guiding principles.

To ensure that our mission is embedded into our culture, we are purposeful in how it is assimilated and applied to all that we do. To begin, all families receive a copy of our mission with their enrollment or re-enrollment contracts. Faculty and staff also participate in this annual agreement: potential hires are pointedly asked during the interview process to consider how they might bring this document to life as a model for students in our school community. Before families and employees sign on to be part of Hawken and share in our culture, we ask them to read, discuss, and embrace the school mission. Similarly, new students create a project around our mission during their orientation week. Additionally, the words of our mission, painted in our front entrance, greet each student, parent, and staff member upon entrance into the school. Likewise, our four core values, *character, intellect, integrity, and empathy*, and grade level essential questions, are painted in each of our grade level gathering spaces. This is not for aesthetics or simply by chance; these represent a few of many purposeful ways we work to anchor our school culture. Our mission is not a document one can only find by digging through our website—it is alive and known in what we do and why we do it. In fact, our method, which outlines our overall institutional approach to education explicitly names *culture as a teaching tool* as one of our six core ideas that fundamentally shape the “Hawken experience.” Through this purposeful work, our mission and core values are deeply rooted and integrated into our school culture and therefore influence the shape and feel of our community.

When a school culture is dynamic and complex, it has its own feel, its own climate, and its own language. Educators and researchers agree that the words teachers choose to use affect student learning. Educator Paula Denton states in a recent article in *Educational Leadership* entitled “The Power of our Words,” “Our language can lift students to their highest potential or tear them down. It can help them build positive relationships or encourage discord and distrust. It shapes how students think and act and, ultimately, how they learn.” The idea that words can help build relationships and trust does not simply apply to academic disciplines. The language and words we choose to embrace and promote as a community have power in our school culture. Words allow us to give life to our values and collectively grapple with and reflect upon how our mission calls us to live. As Albus Dumbledore of the *Harry Potter* series so wisely affirms, “Words, in my not-so-humble opinion, are our most inexhaustible source of magic.”

At Hawken we assembled a student life team to further develop and attend to our school culture. This group of caring educators consists of one teacher from each grade level, an administrator with a lens on character and culture, our learning specialist, and our school psychologist. This team works directly with grade-level teachers to facilitate opportunities for research-based evaluation and refinement of our common lexicon. For example, Carol Dweck’s *Mindset* has inspired us to think about words like “yet” and its power to promote a growth mindset when used and embraced in an integrated and purposeful way. We can all see the stark difference between the comments, “I can’t do fractions” and “I can’t do fractions *yet*.” One suggests natural, fixed ability; the other implies progress through practice. Conversations around the language and words that we choose to use raise the collective awareness of all members of our community,

and we find that if we can adequately put words to our thoughts, beliefs, and educational goals, we are much closer to effectively using culture as a teaching tool. For if we can one day become better mathematicians, then perhaps we also understand that with practice we can continue to become better people.

While it is all well and good to think about culture as a teaching tool in the abstract, there must be a vehicle for developmentally-appropriate programming to take place. Advisory, a critical part of our Hawken Middle School culture, consists of a small group of students (usually 10-12) paired with one or two key adults. The advisory group meets daily, both informally and through planned learning opportunities. Unlike homeroom, our advisory model does not simply take attendance and create space for students to “hang out” during early morning hours, but instead provides meaningful time to build relationships, learn and practice study skills, engage in service learning, and participate in character education programming. The benefits of advisory programming for the middle school child are vast and far-reaching. We know advisory promotes connectedness, open communication, and small, caring communities of learners, but it also creates a mini-culture of students obligated to each other, able and willing to engage in individual and collective reflection that allows for their own assessment of their growth and progress. Through advisory, formative, ongoing assessments in the form of journals, discussions, activities, and facilitated reflections can help students gauge their own understandings and applications of the construct of character.

One of our hallmark advisory programs focusing on character is called “Chapel Grapple,” named after the chapel space where we gather daily as a middle school community. Our approach calls for each advisory to explore the construct of character through the medium of film. Using advisory meetings and full divisional assemblies, our school spends the first eight weeks of the year working together to define our collective core values, and connect to the experiences and choices of characters in the films that students watch together in advisory. The program consists of advisory groups watching sections of a film, engaging in facilitated discussions linked to each year’s essential questions and themes, journaling, and participating in relevant learning activities. This experience culminates in advisory presentations given to the entire middle school community. This year, nineteen advisories, each having watched a different film, shared a meaningful film clip and created a visual representation of our core values and understanding of this year’s theme: *Universe of Obligation*. By the end of our eight weeks, students could identify, define, and explain Hawken’s core values, share their own universe of obligation, and discuss how expanding our collective universe of obligation builds community. This purposeful programming pushes students to both practice developing character strengths, and to think about and the development of their own moral compasses.

Conceptually, character cannot and should not be bifurcated into behavioral traits and moral values. Character is both, and while it may help to deconstruct and articulate the various components of character, it is important to recognize the concept is comprehensive and ever-

evolving. Researchers Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman frame the character conversation around “character strengths” and “character virtues,” identifying broad traits that view the construct of “character” as dynamic and cross-cultural. Writer Paul Tough sheds light on what he calls “noncognitive skills,” or those “character traits” that can be practiced, learned, and demonstrated. These skills may include, but are not limited to, teamwork, resilience, and creativity. At Hawken we also believe students can and do “grow” many character traits through practice. And, at least theoretically, you can measure the results. You can “see the growth.”

This year we are piloting the use of the Mission Skills Assessment, a tool that provides objective, scientific data and feedback on six identified performance-based character traits: teamwork, creativity, ethics, resilience, curiosity, and time management. The test, developed by two researchers at the *Center for Academic and Workforce Readiness and Success*, consists of two 30-minute sessions for students and a teacher-rater assessment of each advisee. This reliable and valid assessment includes a situational judgment test, self-report, biodata, overclaiming, and a fluency measure. This tool will allow our team of educators to better and more comprehensively assess our curricular and program goals as they relate to our mission in assessing success of character education programming. This assessment tool is of particular interest to independent schools across the United States due to its promise of usable data. At Hawken, we see it as one tool of many that helps our community to further understand and assess character strengths. The Round Table meeting is an example of another established and integrated tool successfully used to promote student growth and shape school culture.

The Round Table Meeting is an opportunity for a student to come together with his or her teachers, parents, support services, and administrators to celebrate successes and strengths, to discuss areas of growth, and to identify strategies that will support a student moving forward. Used effectively for the past eight years, this structure is embraced by our faculty, parents, and students as a solution-oriented meeting that appropriately places the student at the center of his or her educational experience. The resulting three-pronged plan that includes components for faculty, parents, and the student provides for a concrete “take-away” that empowers the student to move forward, while feeling the support and care of their teachers and parents. On one hand, these meetings serve to very practically address academic and/ or social-emotional strengths and challenges, or what we call “growing edges”; on the other hand, the round table meeting also creates time and space for a student to assess his or her development of character strengths through honest conversations with supportive adults.

At Hawken, character strengths include but are not limited to self-advocacy, self-regulation, collaboration, integrity, and fair play. Like Seligman, Peterson and Tough, we believe traits like these can be taught, practiced, and grown over time. Often, strategies included in a round table plan specifically work to facilitate opportunities for such practice. For example, a student’s plan may require a student to check in with her science teacher every Monday during study hall. The check-in has dual purposes. From a practical standpoint, the student could benefit from the one-on-one discussion with her science teacher about challenging concepts in science. This will

hopefully increase understanding. Through a character education lens, this strategy facilitates opportunities for this student to practice her self-advocacy skills, as well as resilience. Initially, the plan may require this behavior, but over time, as a student develops this skill, the requirement may no longer exist but the character trait does.

There is another side of character, however, that is more difficult to measure with traditional tools, summative assessments, or facilitated practice. Creating a philosophical consciousness of a personal and collective ethical code rooted in identifiable values cannot be traditionally measured. However, that does not mean we cannot see growth. As educators, it is important that we raise awareness of character and all it entails, facilitate meaningful discussions that help students to grapple with these complex concepts, and create space for student reflection. It is this reflective piece that is so critical as we shape and guide school culture. When we spend time thinking about something, we recognize its importance, we note its value, and our behavior ultimately becomes rooted in what was first a mere reflection. If culture is to be truly influential in teaching character, it must be reflective.

In order to create a reflective school culture, teachers and students must have time to talk about character. It sounds simple enough, but with limited time and busy schedules, relevant discussions and meaningful activities around character can quickly decrease in priority. A flexible schedule and dedicated advisory time is once again critically important. How we choose to spend time as an institution sends clear messages about what we value.

At Hawken, we deeply value relationships. Being truly known and accepted breeds deep and lasting trust. This trust is essential for collective and shared reflective opportunities to exist and pervade our school culture. It allows students to step out of their comfort zones in developmentally appropriate and deeply meaningful ways. It encourages students to metaphorically lay their cards on the table, to share their thoughts, beliefs, and consciousness, even as their individual moral compasses are adjusting and transforming. When students trust us, we do see their growth and progress in their character development, with respect to both their measurable skills and their more evasive values.

Character is a complex and ever-evolving construct. The body of research within the United States and around the world on this critical topic continues to expand daily. While educators have a fairly solid grasp on how to assess student growth and progress in traditional disciplines, we continue to grapple with the best approach to validate our work of teaching character through culture. When character education becomes less of “what we do” and more of “who we are,” we begin to see a connection between philosophical understanding and behaviors that can be learned, practiced, and changed over time.

At Hawken School, we have long recognized the value of character education. Our school was founded in 1915 with the motto "That the better self shall prevail and each generation introduce its successor to a higher plane of life." We believe that character education is the vehicle by

which our students can become their “better selves” and introduce their successors to this “higher plane of life.” When we attend to our school culture and actualize its transformative power, we help to form a community of individuals who feel obligated to each other and to making this world a better place. And ultimately, that’s the greatest assessment of character education programming—how the students of today and the leaders of tomorrow choose to leverage both their character strengths and character virtues to positively transform our global community.

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