Infusing Virtues and Character Education into Curricular, Internship, and Practicum Experiences
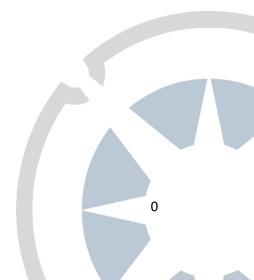
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Infusing Virtues and Character Education into Curricular, Internship, and Practicum Experiences

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Abstract

Select principles of character and virtues education are infused into undergraduate and graduate curricular activities. Combined with mentored field experiences and internships, these support internalization of ethical codes and professional identity. The practicum experiences support skill building and professionalism, exploration of real-life roles, with responsibilities that resemble future careers. The virtues-related decision-making skills reflect the formal ethical guidelines of professions students may pursue in the future. The teaching/learning environment elicits metacognition in the completion of assignments. Combined with practical experiences, the educational path solidifies professional ethical identity. Building firm foundations for the later implementation of professional ethics, is facilitated with a character and virtues-based education.

Introduction to professionalism. Internship and practicum experiences pave the way to skill building and professionalism. These opportunities allow students to explore real life roles and responsibilities, while supervised by professional mentors in the field. These opportunities also allow students, who represent the next generation of professionals, to contribute to the building of strong and ethically sound communities that represent the interests and wellbeing of the people (Rockenbach, 2020). Students who access character education as part of their coursework, develop guidelines and frameworks for ethical choices and decision making. These skills can be translated into leadership that is socially responsible and influences situations for the greater good of society and its constituents. Character education facilitates core competencies, including the skills applicable in multicultural contexts and working with diverse clients.

At an American University, the School of Education (graduate studies) and students in Human Development and Family Science (undergraduate studies) follow an educational path which provides a launching pad into the helping professions. Further (post) graduate school training leads into careers such as counseling psychology, social work, physical therapy, nursing, and education. Students participate in field experiences, internships, and practicums. The students take on responsibilities that resemble real-life and future careers. Their decision-making and skills reflect the formal ethical guidelines of their future professions. Firm foundations allow for the later implementation of professional ethics, by implementing a character and virtues-based education throughout the curriculum. This includes personal experiences in practical situations. By including reflection exercises, journaling and a focus

on metacognitive processes, the intent is to move from awareness concerning virtues to integration of these values into how the profession is exercised and implemented (Lamb et al., 2021). As quoted in Lamb et al. (2021, p.81), Aristotle stated that, "The purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good…" These authors suggest seven strategies in which virtues can be emphasized in tertiary education. In short there are two major angles in this endeavor, namely the theoretical framework supported by the practical implementation. Theory and practice go hand in hand. The strategies include practical situations and applications, opportunities to reflect on personal situations and experiences relating to virtues, exposure to and engagement with role models displaying intended behavior, heightened literacy concerning virtues, the recognitions that there are variances concerning the presentation of virtues in a range of situations, reminders of a moral nature. Lastly, there is an emphasis on the social and interpersonal context by role models, peers as well as relationships which encourage and foster accountability (Lamb et al., 2021).

Keeping these strategies in mind, it reinforces the value of practical contexts for later career preparation, as these educational paths prepare students for later career challenges. Research by the Oxford Global Leadership Initiative (Brant et al., 2019) provided empirical support for the use of reflective, conceptual tools, combined with practical, real-life tasks to support the cultivation of virtue. It follows that how the curriculum of the helping professions is planned and implemented, is important in ensuring the internalization and ultimately professional application of virtues.

A concept found in the current literature on virtues, and the related concept of wisdom, is "*phronesis.*" This term loosely refers to practical virtue and practical wisdom. It implies, among other things, that learning can take place through applied situations. Kristjánsson et al. (2021) propose that this type of practical wisdom can be a form of "*contextual integrative thinking.*" These authors explore the subtleties of this concept starting with Aristotle through to current applications. It is stated:

> We argue for the incremental value of the *phronesis* construct beyond available wisdom accounts because *phronesis* explains how mature decision-making is motivated and shaped by substantive moral aspirations and cognitively guided moral emotions. We go on to argue that, in the context of bridging the gap between moral knowledge and action, *phronesis* carries more motivational potency than wisdom in the 'common model' (Kristjánsson et al., 2021).

Professional development facilitates the formal level required by professional ethical guidelines. These guidelines are set by the licensing boards of the various professions. The ethical guidelines for each profession are both enforceable and aspirational. There are major repercussions if a professional displays unethical behavior that can affect licensure and the ability to practice.

Infusing virtues. In this paper we address how character and virtues are infused into the curriculum of the Human Development and Family Science major, to ensure thorough preparation for responsible helping professional roles. We examine the following areas of study: Family Life Education, Parenting, Family Resource Management, Foundations of Counseling and Research Methodology. In each area, an activity lends itself to exploration of themes surrounding virtue development and can range from artistic expressions,

responsibility for self and others, civic duty, and aspects of civic engagement. In a constructive curricular task, exploration of themes related to virtues allows students to reflect and engage on a deeper level that will allow them to internalize these ideals. Incorporating a creative open-ended task allows for a variety of creative responses. Ideally the assignments address higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy. By completing the tasks, the learning includes metacognition elicited while completing the assignment.

Parallel learning opportunities. In the Parenting course students worked on an online publication of a children's book addressing virtues through "Lessons-to-be-Learned." These books had to be developmentally appropriate and find a way of channeling virtues education within a storyline that would appeal to young children. Using this format, it allowed students to focus on a task (writing the book), but the metacognition that accompanied this project was the insight into the complexities of weaving virtues into educational material. A selection of successful projects were posted online to inspire fellow students.

In the Practicum course, students were tasked with examining the professional code of conduct for family scientists. For each item they had to reflect on what they thought the intent and meaning of the ethical principle was. Subsequently they had to provide examples of how they observed these principles play out in their own practicum experience by providing unique examples they had personally witnessed. Again, the task brought with it a learning opportunity. The expectations of the assignment could only be fulfilled by reflecting and thinking about how their own practical experience had impacted on their value system.

Throughout the curriculum, tasks were created that would spotlight virtues education. Family and Resource Management explored financial outcomes as an influence on family wellbeing and civic responsibility. Family Life Education students completed internships in situations of social concern. Family Dynamics examined the inner workings or dynamics of the family. Research Methodology highlighted virtues and ethics in studies. This course also examined how we ask questions, and why we ask certain questions. Are our research questions truly objective or might they be influenced by subtle biases?

Across a variety of settings, in the curriculum and in specific subjects, the assignments generated greater awareness of virtues and character education. A pleasant by-product was that a sense of ownership developed. students felt responsible for their behavior and virtues implementation. This educational exploration then becomes a vehicle for an enriching personal and virtues-focused journey.

Group dynamics and conflict resolution. Another parallel learning opportunity occurred as students had to deal with group dynamics. These tasks required students to work collaboratively. They had to negotiate principles concerning respect, taking responsibility, leadership, interacting diplomatically, being collaborative and more. These group processes contained their own challenges. and addressed the virtues we display interpersonally. Some group members were "fired" by their groups for being "free riders" and not taking responsibility for their share of the work. When this occurred, the faculty encouraged the groups to handle these situations in a constructive and diplomatic manner, referencing the virtues they were writing about in their books. One book theme was about the collaboration among animals in a preschool setting. It was this same group that could not resolve their interpersonal frictions.

Faculty used this situation to reflect on how the animal characters in the book sought to resolve their differences versus what was happening in real life between group members. Generally, students expressed that these reflective sessions were valuable and taught them skills for the workplace. These individual feedback sessions did not occur in the open classroom setting. Instead, groups experiencing problems had consultations outside the formal class time, and these were managed with appropriate confidentiality and respect, again to model the behavior of constructive conflict resolution.

Ethics education. Ethical principles can be apparent in how we do our work as educators, how we mentor our students, and how we prepare them for their futures in the helping professions. Infusing virtues throughout the undergraduate curriculum, creates an enriching educational journey. How we go about this task and what we model in our own behavior as faculty, may influence student participation and incorporation of a virtues based educational model. The context described in this article, employed active and practical tasks to serve as vehicles in examining virtues and character development.

In practice the boundaries between ethics education and the various activities and interventions that rely on ethical principles in decision making processes, may be somewhat fluid. Kristjánsson (2022), in discussing *phronesis* in business ethics education and managerial practice refers to the the relevance of active learning by stating that *learning by doing* is a method of choice in supporting moral education. Placing this learning into a group context can be valuable in that group members have to develop trust and collaborative social relationships. The same author highlights the relevance of *organizational wisdom,* which broadens the applicability of the concept further, and draws in aspects of mentorship and modeling behavior.

Leadership programs. Graduate programs in Instructional Leadership include the same tenets in the programs as the department of Human Development and Family Science: professionalism, infusing virtues, parallel learning opportunities, group dynamics and conflict resolution, and ethics education. Regarding professionalism, courses in the leader programs are based on the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) which provide foundational principles to help leaders transform students, schools. and society (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). By the end of the program, students have participated in field experiences, activities, presentations, and assessments of the PSEL.

The school's core values, and virtue ethics are infused in each course for the three instructional leadership programs. To provide a framework, the school of education developed five Character Learning Outcomes (CLO). The CLOs are:

1. Know and understand the school of education's core values and their importance.
2. Grow and expand character strengths in both personal and professional life.
3. Lead and serve with a focus on the school of education's core values and ethical virtues.
4. Explore, interpret, and apply practical wisdom.
5. Apply character initiatives and strategies in professional settings.

Two or three Character Learning Outcomes are either introduced, practiced, or assessed in each course to ensure virtues are infused into activities, assignments, and assessments for every course. By the end of the programs, students are assessed on each of the CLOs.

Educational Leadership students have several parallel learning opportunities over the course of the program. As part of the internship, students create, present, and lead various activities related to the course standards. These opportunities allow students specific leadership experiences after which they are to provide a written reflection of their learning from the activity. The internship activities typically occur in their current school under the guidance of the school's administrators. Another parallel learning opportunity in the educational leadership program is the 10-day residency. The requirement is for aspiring administrators to shadow an administrator for 10 days while students are present. The residency provides educational leadership students the opportunity to experience what being an administrator is like on a day-to-day basis.

The Ethical Dilemma Reflection Framework created by Spelman (2022) is one-way students have used collective wisdom to work collaboratively to solve ethical dilemmas. The framework provides a structure for students to work through a scenario an educational leader might encounter to collaborate with others and use conflict resolution. Practical wisdom is exercised as students work with others to come up with solutions for the dilemmas.

Conclusion: With an intentional undergraduate and graduate curriculum, students in the helping and education professions acquire a solid foundation for professional behavior. Combined with practicum, internship and mentoring experiences, professional identity is solidified. These virtues-based principles can then be incorporated into the ethical principles proposed by the various professions.

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Program summary

Select principles of character and virtues education are infused into undergraduate curricular activities. Students internalize ideals in a virtues-focused journey. Combined with mentored field experiences and internships, these support internalization of ethical codes and professional identity.

(About 35 words)

Presenter Bios:

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