



Character Infused Leadership Models to Create Systemic Change in Education

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 12th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel & Magdalene Colleges, Oxford University, Thursday 4th – Saturday 6th January 2024.

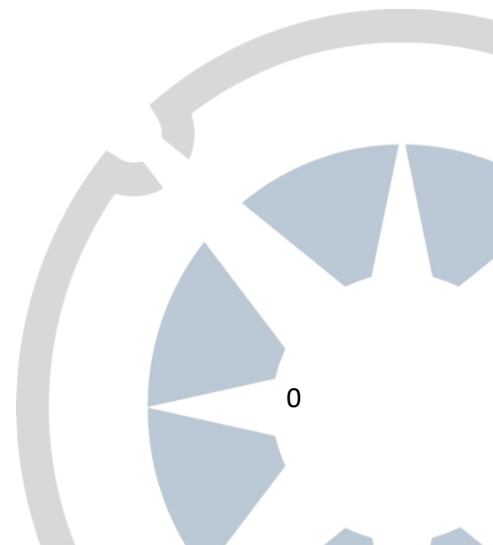
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Anna McEwan and Clara Gerhardt

Abstract. By creating conducive environments that include modeling and education, today's educators perpetuate values and virtues of character in teachers of tomorrow. Good character implies cultivation of values in our personal and moral lives and creating and sustaining environments expressing these. We apply a model of pre-existing, precipitating, and sustaining group processes and provide examples at each level. We examine the phenomenon of lack of engagement and motivation, found in work and teaching/learning environments, and explore the concept '*acedia*' traditionally thought of as 'sloth'. Character related initiatives become catalysts for transformation. We view our initiatives in the context of time: what happened in the past, where are we currently, and our hopes for the future.

Introduction: Values and virtues matter

About 2500 years ago, the philosopher Socrates vented about the ill-mannered youth of his day:

"The children now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority, they show disrespect to their elders...They contradict their parents... gobble up dainties at the table... and are tyrants over their teachers." (Attributed to Socrates, 469–399 B.C.E.)

There is a timeless quality to this grievance. As with previous generations, educators invest in our collective future. Because we feel that the landscape of this noble profession has changed, we ask: ‘How can we do more as educators and as leaders?’, ‘How can we impact the next generation in a meaningful and lasting manner?’ The emphasis on character education, values and virtues addresses some of these concerns. Guiding the next generation optimally represents an investment in all our futures. We may not be able to edit the big brushstrokes, but we can make a difference one relationship at a time.

Character education. The concept of virtues-based education resurfaces repeatedly throughout history. Some of the first documented versions appear in the work of the ancient Greek philosophers, with Aristotle commenting:

“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.”

As a movement in educational contexts, character education emphasizes values and the expression of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that exemplify social virtues. It represents an intentional focus on doing the right thing by acting out on ethical choices which in turn guide conduct. It can be a complex term leading to a variety of interpretations, but the literature shows some consensus that character education represents: ‘any effort to intentionally cultivate human qualities or virtues in people with the goal of individual and societal flourishing’ (Jubilee Center, 2017).

Focusing on values. Values provide direction, hope, and when they guide our actions, they are passed on to the next generation. This can occur repeatedly to all our benefit.

Schools and universities are in the position of facilitating the formation and sustaining of values in students, both through the content of curricula, and the learning communities they represent. Professors and peer groups are in the position to responsibly usher students into different worlds, to reflect on new ideas. This can represent pivotal moments when we can endeavor to see and do things in a better way and choose high moral ground (Biggar, 2022).

At Samford University, which is a private Christian institution, values have found expression in a campus wide intentionality surrounding ‘Faith and Learning’ practices, whereby faith-based virtues are infused

into teaching and learning. Formal character education can be meaningfully supplemented with wisdom-based character education, which relies on local wisdom, such as modeled by elders, parental, and other revered figures. It can also incorporate cultural heritage which is an important consideration in terms of honoring diversity of background, ethnicity, religion, and culture. This type of ‘grassroots wisdom’ finds its way into public institutions such as schools, but it is also informally modeled in families and communities (Parhan & Dwiputra, 2023). If infused into family values, it provides a strong foundation and backup for what is modeled in the school setting. When parents are included in educational initiatives, increased buy-in facilitates the likelihood of pupils internalizing the values.

Mustard-seed initiatives. Encouraged, modelled, and supported by a leadership vision at various levels of the university hierarchy, we support initiatives that matter to us and others and represent chosen values. We call these ‘mustard-seed projects’; named after the tiny seeds that grow rapidly and create favorable environments for other species:

“Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.” (Matthew 13:31-21).

As part of our concerted investment into character education, the faculty, and staff in the school of education at this private university collectively reflected on guiding virtues and values. We did not want to prioritize one value above another, as they are contextual and cannot be rank ordered. To make values a *Leitmotiv* in our educational work, we found it practical to narrow the field. Our smallest initiatives sprouted organically, through a conversation, a perceived need, a wish, an idea. Instead of brushing these impulses away as too insignificant, we listened to our students and our colleagues. We adopted an attitude of ‘let’s try’ and we can evaluate later. As for the bigger projects: we have partnered with schools of character. We infused values and character education throughout our syllabi. Once the mission of the entire school became character education focused, the mustard seed projects grew.

Increasingly too, we matched mentors and mentees, so that in combination, these pairs could encourage greater work engagement and scholarship. This endeavor enhances connectedness and collegiality, ultimately supporting work satisfaction and a positive work-related identity. We are inspired by the small successes in our own setting.

Our school hosts and is an integral part of the *Hope Institute*, which equips educators in disseminating principles related to values and character through the *Hope Leadership Academy*. To this end we have partnered with school leaders to cultivate character development. Each one of these creates a community of character within that school context. We also host a *Communities of Character* podcast.

(<https://www.hopeinstitute.org/>).

Pre-existing, precipitating, and sustaining processes. The interest at the core of this model was to explore and establish how individual values become group values; or how individual *phronesis* (practical wisdom) can become the motivation for a group and be assimilated into a collective endeavor.

Pre-existing processes. We identify the conditions already in place to support us in promoting an environment that supports values and character education. In our case we found that we have a cohesive collegiate and our values align with the mission and values of the greater system. In practice, that means university wide initiatives that accommodate and support our goals.

Precipitating processes. These are factors that nudge a systemic change. They require a responsive and proactive mindset. In our case there was a change of leadership and a perceived need for what was required in our community. We wanted to respond to needs and improve our educational curriculum. To this end we infused the syllabi with components pertaining to character. We were reading our system and exploring where we could respond with meaningful input.

Sustaining processes. After we had implemented changes and indicated a direction of focus to intentionally support character education with concomitant values, we had to find ways to maintain the momentum and anchor our commitment. Our leadership practices were intentional by rewarding initiatives that supported character education. Initially small stipends encouraged time allocation to replan course material. Later reinforcement came through acknowledgement at conferences and publications. We found that the group dynamic changed and processes valuable to our mission, were supported through and reinforced collegiality.

A call to action. To further sustain and strengthen our commitment to this worthy cause, the Dean of our school ensured that our research and dissemination of practices surrounding character education gets the attention and support it deserves. To this end a senior faculty member was assigned the role of

Character Scholar-in-Residence for the school of education. In this role, the scholar supports and mentors faculty in research and presentation endeavors, with the goal of increasing the scholarly output of our school. It also serves to anchor character education related initiatives and gives them permanence by including younger faculty members and accessing the institutional history of older members. Importantly there is a call to action.

Phronesis. 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 and implications of this concept starting with Aristotle to the present. They explain that it is relevant to mature decision making, which is motivated and guided by moral knowledge in combination with *action*.

Integrity, respect, responsibility, and humility. Clarifying our thoughts, we focused on four values as our guiding principles: *integrity, respect, responsibility, and humility*. With these cornerstones in place, we could build an extensive web of value-related endeavors. These values also dovetail into the overarching values of the university (<https://www.samford.edu/about/mission>).

Integrity. Being authentic; acting the same way with all people, in all situations; acting in ways that demonstrate belief in the importance of being honest and behaving ethically.

Respect. Being respectful; acting in ways that demonstrate the belief that all people have worth and should be treated with dignity; demonstrating love and compassion for all people; acting in ways that demonstrate the belief that all people can contribute, and that collaboration and teamwork are desirable.

Responsibility. Being responsible; acting in ways that demonstrate a belief in the importance of fulfilling individual and collective commitments, serving others, making positive contributions, working with purpose, and advocating for people and causes.

Humility. Being humble; acting in ways that are not prideful or arrogant; serving others; demonstrating a commitment to continuous learning and a teachable spirit, both intellectually and personally.

Ethical relativism. According to ethical relativism, there is no definitive or absolute for what can be described as acceptable (right) or unacceptable (wrong) behavior. Cultural, religious, and chronosystemic influences can color how we perceive situations. The latter (chronosystemic influences) denote the time in which we live, for instance we may be influenced by technological advances of the 21st century. In the ethical codes of the helping professions, we find clarification that pertains to the context and the system with qualifying phrases such as: 'For the greater good' and 'First of all do no harm'.

In everyday life virtue and vice can occur in partnership. They can present together, and the value is determined by the context and the systemic *intent*. For example: the positive side of diligence can be constructive: attention to detail, task completion, responsibility, and quality concerns. The negative of this same behavior can be the inability to delegate tasks because of the overwhelming need for control and perfection. The creative mind tends to break rules to deliver original output; the conformist tends to follow the suggested boundaries which can facilitate order, enforceability of regulations and control. The preferred approach appears to lie in the greater systemic and contextual placement of these expressions, considering intent and outcome.

Virtue and vice. In a broadly Christian ethical approach, each vice (or sinful behavior) could potentially be overcome by a corresponding virtue. Seven Christian virtues are ascribed to the writings of St Thomas Aquinas, who in turn based his work on earlier writings. The virtues described in his work are humility, charity, chastity, gratitude, temperance, patience, and diligence. These positives could be applied to temper the forces of a corresponding list of negatives, consisting of pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.

Fostering engagement. One of the challenges that has gained prominence since the Covid endemic is what is labeled as '*Quiet Quitting*' in the popular press. This represents a form of emotional withdrawal from tasks and from an overall job, maintaining a workload that barely keeps an employee from being fired, or a student from failing. The person who acts in this manner often tries to become invisible in the

workplace, avoids attention and tries to maintain the status quo. For whatever reason they must maintain their job: they may be unable to relocate, are dependent on the income, or lack the emotional resilience to change jobs. In the teaching/learning situation it addresses the unmotivated student, who tries to sail by with minimal effort and engagement, while still hoping to obtain a passing grade.

Not only the workplace witnesses these passive ‘passengers’ who ride in the slipstream of others, while dodging responsibilities. In the literature of group dynamics, they are not surprisingly referred to as ‘*free riders*’. Students in universities, pupils in high schools; none of them are immune to the problem. They are overtaken by their own passivity and tolerance of these behaviors by the community context. This presents as a person who is physically present in the place of work or learning but is emotionally absent and unmotivated to give tasks their best. The enthusiasm is lacking, and their leading motivator seems to be finding that point where they can produce the minimum without losing their job or failing a course.

In our teaching environment, we observe this phenomenon in some practicum and internship placements. Students were initially motivated to complete the required hours but do so with minimal emotional engagement. Sadly, these types of interactions do not contribute to the intended professional development. Students do not have an opportunity to explore their calling, and do not gain the hands-on experience under supervision that these placements are intended to provide.

For leadership this is a compelling challenge, as such a student or worker who uses resources while dangerously threatening the morale of a place of work or learning. In many ways this attitude of ‘just enough’ can be catching, and fellow workers can emulate the patterns.

“What most counts is not merely to live, but to live right.” Socrates

Acedia: Poison for Communities of Character. *Acedia* (pronounced 'uh-see-dee-uh' in English) can be traced to its Greek origins as the word *akēdeia*, meaning ‘lack of care’. Acedia has been described by St. Thomas Aquinas as a sadness about things, including those of a spiritual nature. The phrase ‘disgust with activity’ has also been attributed to him. Acedia displays greater complexity than its more simplistic version of ‘laziness’, ‘boredom’ or ‘sloth’. The latter has been named as one of the seven deadly sins, typically gaining last place in the lineup of vices: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. In contrast to these sins, we have the heavenly virtues: humility, charity, chastity, gratitude, temperance,

patience, and diligence. Although *acedia* is often associated with idleness or laziness, it could also be accompanied by restless boredom (Dahm, 2021).

The thinking of old used to be that this disengagement could be fought with manual labor as well as encouraging perseverance. Our post millennial world has created opportunities to be constantly yet passively engaged through social media. The dark side of these media means that they can curtail creativity and go hand-in hand with a sense of competitiveness and social comparison; precursors of poor self-concept, anxiety, and depression (Keles, McCrae & Grealish, 2020). A more finely nuanced understanding of the disillusionment that accompanies *acedia* can be instructive for educational leaders who seek ways to counter the poison of quiet quitting within communities of character. Purpose, wonder, and gratitude have transformative potential when thoughtfully cultivated by virtuous leaders (Dahm, 2021).

Sloth was singled out as one of the major moral defects and leading perpetrator in poor character. Wenzel (2017) quotes writings from antiquity by Evagrius Ponticus (345 – 399 CE), who described monks displaying *acedia* as ‘death in the cells’. It is the process of becoming disinterested and listless because of boredom and monotony. The disengaged student who has lost interest in their coursework may present similarly.

“The demon of ‘*acedia*’, also called the ‘noonday demon’, is the most oppressive of all demons... First, he makes the sun appear sluggish and immobile, as if the day has fifty hours. Then he causes the monk to continually look at the windows and forces him to step out of his cell and to gaze at the sun to see how far it is still from the ninth hour...” (Evagrius Ponticus quoted by Wenzel, 2017, p.3)

Incidentally a part of this quote became the title of a journal article by Bahrish (2016): “Why did the demons come at noontide? Understanding *acedia* and medieval life.” This author states that *acedia* may have a simpler explanation, in the form of seeking comfort, and it could be connected to anxiety and hunger - to which the monks were probably subjected.

If *acedia* was perceived as a vice, the person suffering from this condition was also partly responsible for overcoming it. Researchers have asked whether *acedia* may be akin to depression, but the old scholars had a word for depression namely ‘*melancholia*’, leading us to think these are two separate conditions

(Daly, 2014). With increased acceptance and understanding of mental health conditions, we realize that it may be difficult to flesh out where one ends and the other begins. As Daly (2014) reminds us, it may be a spectrum of 'a spiritual disease'. If acedia is something for which we can take responsibility, then both motivating and punitory approaches are hoped to be effective (push and pull, reward and punishment). We are reminded: 'We can lead a horse to water, but we cannot make it drink'.

Anonymity. The French Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) provided early research that focused on societal influences as they impacted suicide rates. He demonstrated that individuals who live within social contexts of isolation and alienation were at greater risk of taking their own lives. He referred to this as '*Anomie*', a term he borrowed from the French philosopher Jean Marie Guyau. He used it to loosely denote '*without order*'. In such social settings, life was filled with lack of clarity and with associated feelings of detachment (Floyd, in Gerhardt 2020, p.204). It also meant that these individuals were poorly integrated and did not have a sense of belonging or the feeling of being part of a group.

Educational engagement. Humankind tends to flourish in appropriate collective settings, and social isolation and alienation can foster loneliness and lack of engagement. Apply this to the phenomenon of quiet quitting. One angle for interventions would focus on engagement. The pupil who feels unmotivated and tries to get by with the minimum, the worker who is merely waiting for a paycheck - could their interest be reengaged by feeling part of the community in which they are operating? They need to be acknowledged, feel as if they are contributing meaningfully and can take ownership of the values that promote educational engagement and ultimately lead to realizing their own potential.

Creating a community of character. We can rely on internal agents within the person to change their circumstances. 'Pull yourself together', is the kind of reprimand we could expect. But subtle cues from the environment are also thought to play a role. Facilitating an environment where values support emotional wellbeing. If we can create such a community, be it for work or learning, where the participant feels valued for their contributions, where they have the sense of being seen and heard (as opposed to being invisible), we contribute to their sense of wellbeing and related achievement. As educators and leaders, we have the task to create such a community. If the values of good character are appreciated and acknowledged, it will elicit spontaneous participation, because the emotional rewards serve as the

reinforcers. Literature frequently reminds us that ultimately the expression of actions supporting communities of character will take on a life of their own. Participants do good because it is the right thing to do, the values are internalized and self-reinforcing.

“Intelligence plus character; that is the goal of true education.” Martin Luther King Jr.

By the people, for the people. In the schools in our community which are supported by the “Hope Institute” initiative, a motivating force is to encourage emotional ownership, participation, and engagement. When mission and values statements are developed, the input of all the learners is encouraged. The material must be generated by the people, for the people. This social engagement carries with it investment. Investment in turn promotes the concern for the wellbeing and success of the outcome. Using a classical metaphor: if we are part of the planting process, we will be vested in the harvest:

“The law of harvest is to reap more than you sow. Sow an act, and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny.”

James Allen, (1864-1912), British philosophical writer

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