



**FROM THE PROFESSIONS TO THE UNIVERSITY: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR A CHARACTER EDUCATION
PROGRAM BASED ON THE READING OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL TEXTS**

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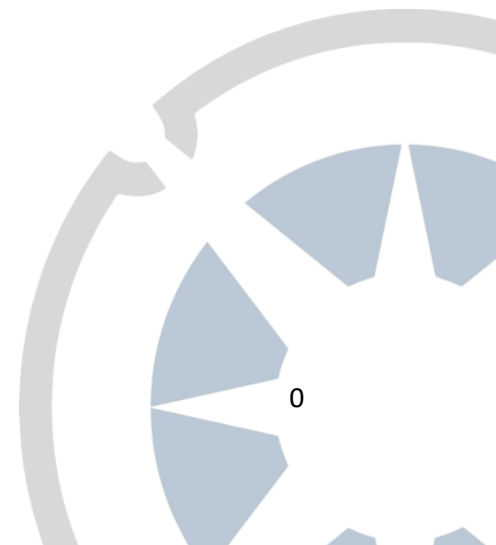
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FROM THE PROFESSIONS TO THE UNIVERSITY: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR A CHARACTER EDUCATION PROGRAM BASED ON THE READING OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL TEXTS

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Recent years have seen a renewed interest in the study of character and its education, especially as it relates to character formation in college. Several authors point out the importance of designing specific programs, both inside and outside the curriculum, to promote the development of virtues such as leadership, service, and wisdom in college students (Brant et al., 2022; Lamb et al., 2021; Naval et al., 2022). Throughout these pages, we wish to present an innovative proposal: the conceptual framework for the design of a program to educate the character of university students based on the reading of phenomenological texts.

This paper is structured as follows: (1) First, we will describe the current state of theoretical reflection on the question of character education in the university and its place within the mission of the university as a social institution. (2) Next, we will develop the topic of the formative potential of the reading of phenomenological texts, previously explaining the phenomenological-hermeneutic research process necessary to develop the material that will be presented to the students. (3) Thirdly, we will show a practical example of how an extracurricular character education program could be structured in the university that uses as its main methodology the reading of phenomenological texts on the practice of virtues in professional life. (4) Finally, we will summarize the previous points and propose some recommendations for the implementation of this conceptual work.

1. University Mission and Character Education

Character education means any effort on the part of an institution (e.g., a school, college, or in this case a university) to promote the development of moral and intellectual virtues in its members. Now, to understand what the role that this “effort” may entail, or the possible alignment of this “effort” with the general objective of the university as an institution, it seems interesting to ask

ourselves: what is the mission of the university? And after that question, how does character education relate to the mission of the university? We will answer these two questions in this section.

There are different perspectives on what the mission of the university can be (Scott, 2006; Torralba, 2013). According to Ortega y Gasset (2010), the university has three missions: the first and most fundamental is to promote a liberal education, the second is the professional training of students and the third is scientific research. For Ortega y Gasset (2010), a liberal education refers to contributing to the development of intellectual maturity, so that students reach a global interpretation of reality. To this end, and to improve the current fragmentation of knowledge, some universities pay special attention to reading programs of great books and humanistic subjects in traditionally technical or scientific careers to favour such a vision in students.

From a sociological point of view, we consider that every social institution has a role to play in society (Burbules, 2020). It is precisely this role that delimits its institutional mission. An organization, for example, a university, would have the function of providing certain goods and services to society. This function is what makes its existence as an organization viable. In the case of the university, these goods would be, according to Ortega y Gasset (2010): to offer a liberal education, to train professionals in different fields of knowledge, and to undertake serious scientific research. A detailed analysis of each function would take us beyond the scope of the present manuscript. What we would like to emphasize is that in the three functions of the university, there is a glimpse of a certain social function on which character education would operate.

As for liberal education, although it can be much discussed, we believe that every educational act has an eminently ethical purpose, that is, it seeks the good and the maximum development of human nature (Altarejos & Naval, 2011). Thus, educational actions aimed at perfecting critical skills and helping students obtain a "global interpretation of reality" seek to develop people of character, ethically sound, or who embody all those qualities that make human nature stand out.

At the same time, concerning the second mission, a well-trained professional is not only one who possesses adequate technical knowledge. But the one who somehow manages to perceive the role that his profession has – its social function, in the words of MacIntyre– in the face of the common good (Burbules, 2020). The economist who seeks to reduce poverty, the jurist who seeks a truly fair legal system, the doctor who cares about the physical well-being of his patients and their health, the educator who strives to make his students grow integrally, etc. In other words, a good professional, in addition to technical competence, would have to have within him a strong call to the common good.

Finally, scientific research itself, even in the diversity of modalities (basic experimental research, applied medical research, research in the social sciences, humanistic studies and in-depth reflection on culture, etc.), in addition to being encouraged by economic determinants, somehow exists to respond to some of the demands of today's society. The research analysed from the point of view of social praxis is aimed at achieving certain ends (Burbules, 2020): the advancement of knowledge, the cure of diseases, the improvement of the educational system, technological development with potential applications in the life of society, etc. Here, too, the moral character of the investigator is of great importance.

At this point the question may arise: how can character education be articulated within the mission of the university? To this end, we would like to define what we mean by character education. According to Naval et al. (2015), character education is currently an umbrella term that brings together different initiatives related to virtue education, values education, and citizenship

education. Unlike other proposals such as Lawrence Kohlberg's model of cognitive moral development, character education can refer to a certain type of moral education based on the development of good habits or virtues (Naval et al., 2015). In the U.S. and the U.K., there has been a great expansion of initiatives that encourage character education at the elementary and secondary school levels.

Although the idea of character education has emerged in the school context, today different groups and associations are seeking to apply its principles in the university environment. There is, for example, the *Oxford Leadership Initiative* for postgraduate students at the University of Oxford. In this program, character is cultivated through seminars on the different virtues, cultural activities and social-recreational events such as meals, excursions, retreats, etc. At the University of Navarra, there is also the *Leadership as Service* program, which is inspired by the Oxford program, but aimed at undergraduate students. In addition to these two initiatives, Wake Forest University (USA) and the University of Hong Kong have been implementing their programs to develop the character of their students for several years.

In any case, the existence of these programs invites us to ask ourselves about the importance and need to dedicate time and effort to developing the character of young university students. A recent book entitled "*Cultivating Virtue in the University*" edited by Jonathan Brant, Edward Brooks and Michael Lamb (2022), echoes this reflection. This book mentions some ideas as to why this education is necessary. In the first place, it is a task that concerns the university institution itself from its roots. Secondly, the stage of early or emerging adulthood, between the ages of 18 and 29, holds many potentialities, but also challenges. Findings from the field of neuroscience underscore the fact that certain parts and functions of the brain related to decision-making and impulse control are not fully developed until at least 25 years of age. At the same time, current social trends encourage ideals of consumerism, romantic relationships with no view to a stable commitment, and blindness to the social needs around them.

Faced with this reality, there is a growing awareness of how important it is to help young people during their time at university. This period is necessary for their human and psychological maturity, as well as a decisive moment to acquire habits and values that allow them to become responsible adults committed to society through their future profession.

As part of the efforts to educate character, seven strategies have been proposed for its promotion in the university setting (Lamb et al., 2021). However, of all of them, we would like to highlight one here: the relationship with morally exemplary people (in this case professionals). There is evidence that exemplary people can have a great effect on the character development of other people, especially people who are close to students and not great characters whose imitation is complex (Han & Dawson, 2023).

The importance of moral role models seems to be an essential need not only for youth but throughout the life of the individual. Think, for example, of the family; in which parents who strive to practice virtue themselves, offer example, positive reinforcement and prudence in the decisions they make about the education of their children (Steutel & Spiecker, 2004). In the same way, the relationship with virtuous people has great formative potential in the university stage (Lamb et al., 2021). Watching examples of virtue lived and practised regularly can motivate, offer guidelines for action, and be a reminder to keep in mind that such a way of acting is possible and produces positive effects around you.

In the university context, professors can offer an invaluable service by enacting themselves good character traits and being role models for the students. A virtuous professor himself has the opportunity to model many behaviours and criteria in his students through his treatment, the way he prepares classes and to stimulate in each one a desire for personal improvement and training. Despite this, a key complement to the virtuous performance of the university professor is what we think would be the novel contribution of this work. We are referring to the reading and viewing of the lived experiences of professionals who exercise their profession in an exemplary and virtuous way. In the next section, we will explain in more detail what we mean by this proposal.

2. The formative potential of the reading of phenomenological texts

As mentioned before, we argue that university students can benefit from contact with virtuous professional referents. These professionals can stimulate the attraction for lived virtue and promote desires of emulation. But how do you bring several virtuous professional models to the classroom? Specifically, we propose here the use of Max van Manen's phenomenological-hermeneutic method to carry out research and subsequent interventions with young university students. The final product of phenomenological-hermeneutic research is its phenomenological text. In this section, we will describe what this text is about and how it can be used to provide students with examples of virtuous professionals.

To begin with, we would like to present an example of an everyday experience and comment on how it can be studied using the phenomenological-hermeneutic method. In our day-to-day lives, while we carry out our profession, or carry out our family tasks, we do things consciously, but to a certain extent somewhat thoughtlessly. For example, when doing an online tutorial with a student, we don't reflect on what my tone of voice or my gaze is like in that tutorial and that both can have a positive or negative impact on that particular student. We take many things for granted, and our attention is focused on what seems most important here and now.

The phenomenology of practice seeks to help people relive such everyday experiences of their day-to-day work in professional work. As these experiences are often lived "pre-reflectively", there are many veins of precious ore that have not been extracted at the time of being in the mine. Rather, it is necessary to return again and again to the experience to better understand what can help us to perform better and better the professional role we have chosen.

And so, a good way to do this is through the reading and study of phenomenological texts. According to the researcher and pedagogue Max van Manen, a phenomenological text is a discursive narrative, the result of phenomenological-hermeneutic research, which transforms lived experiences into a written piece with a dialogic effect that provokes an appeal to the cognitive and non-cognitive sensitivities of readers through the reader's reflexive approach to a human phenomenon (e.g. the hope lived in the pedagogical relationship of the teacher with his student, or responsibility in the physician's relationship with his patient). A phenomenological text, by fostering a more reflective understanding of a lived experience, invites the reader to recognize and relive those experiences.

As Jordán explains (2008), these texts imply a special type of knowledge, quite different from the contributions of the social sciences that take inspiration from the positivist paradigm and seek to "explain" and control human behaviour. The intention of phenomenological-hermeneutic research and its product, the elaboration of a phenomenological text, is "to humanize human life to help human beings to be increasingly reflective about their daily experiences and, thus, to be more prepared to act tactfully and correctly in certain situations" (Jordán, 2008). Below, as an example,

we present the lived experience of a high school teacher with his respective phenomenological text from the phenomenological research of Professor Raquel Ayala (2011, p. 129):

“The teachers were simply waiting for Alberto to finish the course; and, as he was already at the age limit, to leave the Institute. However, I thought that the few months he had left couldn’t be nonsense. If neither the ordinary classroom nor the workshop worked, we had to try something else so that, at least for a few days, he would be comfortable and learn something useful.” (Teacher from a public secondary school)

This teacher is not resigned to the fact that Alberto’s educational present will run insubstantially into the future. He refuses to see this time as just the waiting room for school failure. Certainly, we can live in the future—like Alberto’s other teachers—but only the open future belongs to hope (Bollnow, 1962). (...) Pedagogical hope moves from that immediate future—which curriculum planning tries to configure—to that distant future that it glimpses on a broad horizon for its students.

In the context of character education at university, the reading of phenomenological texts has a formative potential. Through the students’ contact with lived experiences about the practice of different virtues in their respective future professions, the aim is to awaken in them the desire for emulation, to reflectively question themselves: “Couldn’t I also exercise my future profession in this way?” In other words, we thought that the reading and reflection of phenomenological texts about the practice of virtues in the professions has the formative potential to arouse the desire to repeat such actions. We consider the latter as the first step in a process of formation and development of habits of character in the context of university education, since through living example an understanding is reached that theoretical guidelines fall short.

The present initiative is in line with previous research demonstrating the potential of phenomenological texts in university education. Jordán (2008) himself presents an example of how reading and reflecting on phenomenological texts produced positive effects on the motivation and comments of a group of teachers in training. In the context of nursing, phenomenological texts about the experience of living with advanced cancer have been used to encourage nursing students to reflect and improve the nurse-patient care relationship (Carvajal et al., 2021; Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2019, 2023). In both cases, the activities of reading phenomenological texts were offered to the students in the form of free, loosely structured tasks.

3. Design of an extracurricular program of character education in the university based on the reading of phenomenological texts

In this section we will present some ideas about how a possible program that uses the methodology of reading phenomenological texts to educate the character of university students could be configured.

Target Population:

Given the level of training (higher education), a character education program design must have particular characteristics. At this level, demanding the repetition of virtuous acts cannot be directly imposed on university students. Although such repetition is essential, how it is promoted by the programme should be adapted to the developmental circumstances of emerging adults. Instead of asking students to repeat virtuous actions, the program aims to promote reflection on how the following moral virtues can be applied in professional practice and to arouse the desire to repeat such actions. As a pilot edition, this program would be carried out with students of education and psychology degrees.

Virtues to be worked on:

Following Jordan (2011), in the case of school and college teachers, there are three virtues or ethical-pedagogical dispositions essential for every educator:

- Pedagogical responsibility
- Pedagogical love
- Pedagogical Hope

Below are three excerpts from the article published by Professor Jordán in which he explains in great detail the different faces of these three pedagogical virtues.

On pedagogical love:

Pedagogical love is certainly not to be confused with the self-love of parents, friends or lovers. In the first place, because the teacher does not choose his students, meeting them when they first appear in the class. Secondly, because the school relationship goes beyond the strictly existential one, as it also includes, of course, the mission of teaching diverse academic content. Thirdly, because it is a love fused with the pedagogical good of each particular student, thus being a more specific affection than that which characterizes the strictly human loving relationship. This explains why Van Manen (1998, 88) makes a comment like this: "The pedagogical relationship always implies a duplicity of intentions: the authentic educator certainly feels affection for each child entrusted for what he or she is, but also for what he or she can become; So, without that duplicity, the relationship ceases to be strictly pedagogical." (Jordan, 2011, pp. 62–63)

On pedagogical responsibility:

"There is something about the little ones that stimulates us and attracts us to them in a very concrete way [...] It is this pedagogical inclination that calls us, that summons us to listen to their manifold needs" (1998, 41-42). "We could say that the weakness or vulnerability of the child becomes a curious force on the adult [...] Of course, there is the reaction of simply ignoring the child and going about our business, as if we had no pedagogical responsibility. Why do I have to listen to a child? What do I have to do with this child's life? In fact, what some do is ignore them. But for others, neglecting the feeling of responsibility is simply not possible. A child asks me for help, and I feel that I must act receptively and responsibly with him. 'To feel claimed' is the most important, the deepest meaning of being an educator or pedagogue" (Ibid., 109) (Jordan, 2011, p. 67)

On pedagogical hope:

The pedagogical interpretation of hope makes it clear that we can only place it in the children or young people we truly love, not in a sentimental sense, but in the most pedagogical sense. Understood in this way, hope urges us to think of each one of them: "I will not leave you stranded; I am convinced that you can become more and better" (Ibidem). And he continues: "Hope is nourished by patience, openness, belief and trust in the possibilities of our children. When they sense our confidence, they are encouraged to trust themselves. Trust makes them capable" (Ibidem). (Jordan, 2011, pp. 76–77)

In the current program, we would present excerpts from the lived experiences of education and psychology professionals that exemplify the implementation of these three virtues.

In addition, we believe it is important to work on the formation of two virtues that complement this first set of ethical-pedagogical dispositions. These virtues would be:

- Social Meaning of the Profession

- *Phronesis* or Practical Wisdom

By the social meaning of the profession, we mean “a knowledge of what the real nature of work is” (Allers, 1940, p. 158). In any case, it is an intellectual virtue that refers to the knowledge possessed by the student about the purpose or social function of all work in general and his future profession in particular. Work in general would not only be a means of earning a living but “the production of values that last longer so the activity which produces them (...). Work is essentially an effort for others” (Allers, 1940, p. 158). To illustrate the paramount importance of this point, we allow ourselves to quote the Viennese psychiatrist Rudolf Allers, who addresses this question in his work “Character Education in Adolescence” (1940, pp. 5–6):

Practice, however, means applying a knowledge of facts and theories to certain ends. All practical measures, whether taken by an engineer in building a bridge, or by an inspector of police in striving to maintain order, or by a teacher who wishes his pupils to learn things, or by a physician who tries to help a sick person to regain health — all practical measures taken by these and other people are adopted for the sake of realizing certain aims. And it is the nature of the aims which dictates the kind of measures these people take. The engineer knows how to build a bridge, but he has to be told where a bridge is needed and for what — a railroad, heavy cars, or just pedestrians. The inspector of police knows the measures necessary to preserve order, but why order has to be kept is something which is entirely outside his province; order must be kept because the community or the higher authorities wish it. The teacher uses the didactic methods in vogue, because he himself has been told that knowledge is desirable and necessary, and the physician knows that man desires to be freed from suffering and to be given back health; that these are aims approved by man in general is nothing which could be deduced from the information supplied in the textbooks on teaching or on medicine.

Every practical measure, then, is determined by the ends which it is applied to realize. Educational measures, in particular, depend on what is believed to be the true aim of education. Science is absolutely and essentially incapable of discovering anything about aims. If someone tells us that we have to pursue this or that aim because of some statements of science, we may be sure beforehand that he is wrong; he may, of course, be right in recommending certain aims, but he is right, not because of his appeal to science, but in spite of it.

We are taught what is right and what is wrong, not by science, but by morals or by moral philosophy.

In the case of the educator, the particular meaning or function of his work would be the duty to promote the cultural development and human formation of the learners. In the case of the psychologist, this function is related to the promotion of mental health, a broad notion that nevertheless has its roots in the achievement of the good life or the development of the maximum human potential, including ethical training.

As for *phronesis* or practical wisdom, this meta-virtue is defined by Kristjánsson et al., (2021) as “an intellectual meta-virtue of holistic, integrative, contextual, practical reflection and adjudication about issues”. It is, in any case, a habit that is at a higher hierarchical level than the other virtues. That is to say, it guides and helps each virtue or operative habit to be properly executed, considering the characteristics of the context of the action and the possible integration of several routes of virtuous action. In the professional field, it has been noted that the possession of this meta-virtue is essential for the ethical and professional exercise of work (Burbules, 2020; Fowers et al., 2022; Jameel, 2021).

Activities and duration:

Students participating in this program will be required to complete three types of activities.

1. Shared search seminars.

Following the format used in seminars for the reading of great books of literature (The Great Books Foundation, 2014), in this program the didactic methodology called “Shared Inquiry” will be applied, which consists of the guided search for meaning, in this case, the essence of the human phenomenon of the practice of the different virtues in the professional field. According to the authors of this methodology, guided search can be applied to achieve the following objectives:

Shared Inquiry promotes an intellectually stimulating interpretative discussion of a work—a group exploration of meaning that leads to engaging and insightful conversation. It helps participants read actively, articulate probing questions about the ideas in a work, and listen and respond effectively to each other. And it is based on the conviction that participants can gain a deeper understanding of a text when they work together and are prompted by a leader's skilled questioning. (p. 1)

As for the way to conduct a session according to this methodological scheme, the role of the moderator or leader of the seminar is essential. Its role is defined as follows:

The Shared Inquiry leader prepares interpretive questions to initiate the discussion, then moderates its course by challenging responses, following responses with more questions, asking for evidence from the text, and inviting further response. If participants digress from the main points, the leader redirects the group's attention with questions. A leader must also be able to recognize when no new ideas are being added to the conversation. At that point, the leader should pose a new interpretive question. (p. 12)

A weekly 60-minute seminar will be organized for each of the virtues promoted in this program

2. Practical activity: Designing a service-learning program.

Along with the seminars, participants in the current program will have to design a service-learning project in which a social need can be solved through the practice of the knowledge acquired in their current degree and future profession. Through this activity, a reflective reading of the reality and social needs close to the professional field will be encouraged. Such a project can take on a more specific concentration and take the form of either an intervention protocol or a research protocol to increase knowledge or determine the causes of the problem studied. Students will receive seminars on project design and research methodology to assist them in the development of their proposals. Students will work in teams to design the projects. At the end of the program, each group will present their project to the other participants.

3. One-on-one tutoring

On a weekly or biweekly basis, each participant will have a tutor from the program with whom they can have tutoring sessions on the topics covered in the shared search seminars and/or service learning project.

4. Conclusions

It is hoped that, through this communication, researchers and university professors will learn more about the applicability of the reading of phenomenological texts as a means to educate character in the university. Even though the alternative proposed here has an extracurricular program format, we believe that the use of this innovative methodology can also be of great benefit when applied to subjects already existing in the curriculum of future university graduates.

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