



Center for Teaching Excellence
Hampton University
Teaching Matters

September/October 2018

Volume 13, Number 3

In This Issue

◆ Some Reflections on Teaching Character

◆ Focus Your Lecture with the ‘One-Sentence Lesson Plan’

◆ Put Teaching First

◆ Announcements

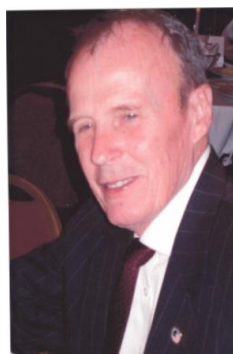
Guest Column

Some Reflections on Teaching Character

by

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*Professor Emeritus of English**



Hampton University has always placed great importance on character. At Founding Day 2018, President William R. Harvey recalled the importance Hampton’s founder General Samuel Chapman Armstrong placed on strong academics but also good character. Of the two, Dr. Harvey noted, Armstrong considered character the more important. Dr. Harvey added that academics and character might be even more important now than they were when Hampton was founded 150 years ago in 1868. Certainly the two have been the major emphases of Dr. Harvey’s forty-year tenure as president. Consistent with that focus, HU has instituted a “Quality Enhancement Plan” (QEP) that seeks to engage students in “. . . learning experiences that foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the role of character, community, and culture in their personal and professional lives.” This ambitious effort is conceived in terms of all aspects of student life, and most certainly the academic program.

That said, it is far from clear that teaching good character is as direct and straightforward a proposition as, say, teaching students to assess the underlying causes of the American Revolution or Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics. At a minimum, the one involves a quite different process than the other two. In the final analysis, there is some reason to question whether it is even possible to “teach” good character, at least in the conventional sense of that verb. Considering the effort that has been made to do so over the years, the

often spotty and inconsistent results suggest that we have much to learn on that subject. Given its importance, however, some conscious attention to the problems in doing so seems more than warranted.

How often have we heard the old saying “As the twig is bent, so the tree will grow”? Then in due course, after it has matured and born fruit, we are reminded, perhaps, that “The apple doesn’t fall that far from the tree.” Perhaps, but perhaps not. And there we have two polar views regarding the formation of character. As it were, nurture vs. nature. Clichés generally become clichés because they’re true--paradoxically enough, even when they seem to contradict one another. Socrates found the nature/nurture relationship problematical, and the passage of two and one-half millennia has not sufficed to resolve its difficulties.

Sadly, we all know instances of individuals blessed with every opportunity to develop flawless character who instead have been spectacularly successful in resisting any taint of decency whatsoever. History provides a virtually inexhaustible stock of lurid examples. The Roman emperor Caligula had the finest of parents and the best of upbringings. Or, probably more commonly, there are people who appear to conform to all the conventional expectations until that moment arrives which--for whatever reason--finds them wanting. Conversely, some individuals emerge from circumstances that border on worst-case by any standard to become models of everything we could hope for in a human being. And we look admiringly and wonder how this could be possible, given all we know about how character is formed. The likely answer is that we don’t really know all that much.

At this point it might be well to ask, what *is* good character? In what does it consist? How do we know it when we see it? If we’re going to teach it, those seem like reasonable questions. Not to speak of the difficulties of then assessing what we hope we’ve taught. Absent the convenience of a window into the soul or psyche, we probably need to take it for a given that good character manifests itself in what someone does, and of course what he or she does not do. Over the course of millennia, there have been virtually countless efforts to reduce the basics to a list--whether as prolix as the 282 case laws that constitute Hammurabi’s Code (1792-1750 BCE) or the relatively concise Hampton University Code of Conduct (2018 CE).

We began this reflection on character development by citing the familiar nature/nurture dichotomy. This is not the place to consider the role of nature other than to observe that efforts to manage it one way or another have sometimes taken a dark turn. Consider the associations that the term “eugenics” calls up. As regards nurture, and in the face of occasional evidence to the contrary, the age-old assumption has been that it is both possible and worthwhile to promote the development of character in whatever direction deemed desirable by the particular culture in question.

Here it seems worth noting that there is nothing absolute about the traits associated with good character. We take a dim view of theft, for example, clear evidence of poor character. But in ancient Sparta, in order

to develop survival skills deemed critical to that warrior society, boys were not given enough to eat. They were expected to steal in order to make up the shortfall, but then if they got caught, they were beaten for making a bad job of it. One could cite virtually unlimited similar examples over the course of human history.

Unfortunately, within a humanistic frame of reference--that is, without reference to any concept of transcendent deity--moral philosophy has not succeeded in identifying any convincing absolute basis for practicing the virtues that we or any other society associate with good character. It remains far from clear why one should choose the good--or even how to identify the good with any degree of certainty. Once again, the attempt defines itself in terms of a dichotomy. Kant's categorical imperative requires one to choose so that their choice could be raised to universal law, irrespective of immediate real-world circumstances. To tell a lie, for example, would mean people should lie whenever they spoke, clearly a logical contradiction, given the purpose of speech.

In effect, Kant's approach raises reason in the abstract to the status of the ideal to be served for its own sake. On the other hand, a consequentialist chooses on the basis of the likely results of that choice. Choice as such then becomes instrumental, the means to an end in its own right. Under closer scrutiny, however, that end (with rare and qualified exception) proves to be just another means to another end, and so on until the process reaches its final, irreducible objective, which almost inevitably turns out to be happiness.

The best candidate for absolute good is probably happiness, but it is certainly not a very lofty or inspiring one. If good character has individual or collective happiness for its ultimate objective, then what of the person who makes himself happy at the expense of others, or worse, by making others miserable? Duty and virtue are among other possible examples of absolute good that are sometimes put forward. To Kant, it was a person's duty to tell the truth, but virtuous only to the extent that for whatever reason they didn't want to but did so anyway.

To a remarkable degree, given advances in so many other areas of human endeavor, the methodology employed to develop good character has remained restricted--good models and/or bad models; or good consequences and/or bad consequences; or varying combinations of the two oppositions, whether improvised or structured.

Put into simplistic terms, a dutiful parent might read Timmy a Little Golden Book on how good little boys behave in the grocery store. The next day, when Timmy starts to carry on in the supermarket candy aisle, the parent might remind him of the story and point out how well the child in front of them is acting, just like the little boy in the book. But then, when Timmy's cries rise to an ear-piercing crescendo, he gets a good one on his backside, and then another so he knows the first wasn't an accident. And then, of course, he cries even louder. But perhaps next time he will be the very personification of childhood virtue. Perhaps.

Notwithstanding these and many other doubts, concerns, reservations and qualifications, the assumption that one can and should teach character is deeply embedded in the Western tradition from the Platonic Academy in Fourth-Century BCE Athens to present day HU. Plato's concept of the soul identified three parts--reason, spirit and appetite. Plato was, of course, no democrat. The broad mass of people, in his view, were driven by appetite--for food, drink, shelter and sex. As it were, "the deplorables." In his ideal state, their lot in life was to see to the material needs of society--under close supervision, of course, and Plato did not trouble himself deeply concerning the specifics of their education. At the other end of the spectrum was that small number of individuals--male and female both--whose minds were capable of loftier thoughts. Eventually the most intelligent of them would govern society, so the development of their character was a matter of critical concern. Good models played a key role in this process, but bad ones were rigorously excluded. For example, the Greek epics are replete with treachery of one sort or another, on the part of both gods and men, but those parts would be excised lest their future leaders come to think such behavior was normal and acceptable. Up to a point in their education, they were led to uncritically accept and assimilate the basic tenets and assumptions of their society. Then, the best and the brightest, those few in whom reason was the dominant characteristic, were culled in order to continue their studies, now, however, using unfettered reason as the means to search for ultimate truth. In due course, they would become Plato's famous philosopher kings. The rest, whose souls were dominated by spirit, would become the guardians, responsible for the security of the state, whose informing principles they would continue to accept and enforce without question.

Plato had likely seen Sophocles' famous drama *Oedipus Tyrannus*, which, it can be argued, depicts the tragic results of an individual dominated by an unchecked fiery spirit becoming ruler of Thebes, certainly a position he would have never attained in Plato's Republic. Plato's student Aristotle, however, had a more qualified, real-world oriented view of education, but it too focused on character, "a disposition to virtue," as he says in *Politics*, "and the performance of virtuous actions." For Aristotle it was particularly important that leaders both exhibit these qualities themselves and strive to bring them out in the people they lead.

To the extent that we here at Hampton believe that we are educating leaders of tomorrow, Aristotle's view could scarcely be more relevant. Notwithstanding the difficulties, uncertainties and occasional disappointments that effort entails, we do it because it is worthwhile, at least as important as whatever subject matter or activity with which it is associated. And we know it often works--as much by some alchemistic process that defies rational analysis as by any sort of methodology to which we can point and measure and tweek.

Some of us are old enough to remember the late Dr. Martha E. Dawson, who for many years was Vice President for Academic Affairs here at Hampton. Dr. Dawson was a wise woman. The HU Center for Teaching Excellence owes its existence to her vision. Dr. Dawson once

remarked that education was the only product she knew where the customer did not want to get their money's worth. Certainly that's true of many of our customers, unhappily. On the other hand, a major part of the genius of Apple's Steve Jobs apparently lay in developing products that people didn't know they wanted until he marketed them. In the case of our profession, the equivalent might well be an indifferent student who, almost before he is even conscious of it, finds himself drawn into a subject as a result of a charismatic instructor, or even just a dedicated, committed one.

Finally, it might be well to recall the roman poet Horace's dictum that the aim of poetry is to instruct and delight--to instruct by delighting and to delight by instructing (*Ars Poetica*, verse 333ff). In certain significant respects, the role of the instructor is analogous. And at its best, inspired instruction can rise to the level of poetry.

**Dr. John Alewynse served as the first Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence. He was honored as Professor Emeritus of English when he retired as Chair of the Department of English and Foreign Languages. Dr. Alewynse's accomplishments as a teacher, scholar, and administrator make him the ideal spokesperson to launch the year-long focus on "character" that will be highlighted in Teaching Matters.*

Focus Your Lectures with the 'One-Sentence Lesson Plan'

By Norman Eng, Ed.D.

www.facultyfocus.com

Professors tend to cover a lot of content over the course of one class session. Yet students will probably forget most of it by the end of the semester. Why? One reason is that we focus too much on *teaching*, and not enough on *learning*. Students, therefore, don't really get to grapple with the topic you just lectured about. They're too busy taking notes. And most times, they don't see a point to learning all this "stuff."

Enter the **one-sentence lesson plan**.

The one-sentence lesson plan helps professors focus on *learning*—rather than on *teaching*—by answering three simple things: The *what*, the *how*, and the *why*.

The *what*

First, *what* do you want your students to know (or be able to do) by the end of class? Here, you identify the skill or the content to be learned.

For example, I want students to be able to *evaluate the credibility of sources*. That's a skill. Another example is: *Students will be able to explain and apply Piaget's four stages of cognitive development*. That's content.

More importantly, identifying your *what* forces you to narrow your

teaching. This is the hardest part for most professors. Even if you have more than one *what*, this exercise still pushes you to prioritize. I recommend you “niche” your lecture topic down to one major concept.

The *how*

Next, *how* will students reach this goal?

In other words, what method, strategy, tool, or activity will you employ to make sure they know what they’re supposed to know or gain the skill they’re supposed to gain? This is the hands-on part, where students grapple with the content.

Building on the first example, I might write: *Students will be able to evaluate the credibility of sources by “triangulating” information.* That’s *how* students will be able to evaluate sources—the strategy. However, there are other ways to learn this skill. I could just have easily stated:

Students will be able to evaluate the credibility of sources by discussing in groups the pros and cons of each source.

In this case, the *how* is an activity or method.

The *why*

Finally, *why* are students learning this?

This is the “so what?”—why do students need to know or do this? What’s in it for them? How do they benefit? It’s about understanding your audience. Usually, the *why* starts with the prompt, “so that . . .”

Continuing with the evaluating sources example, I might state:

Students will evaluate the credibility of sources by “triangulating” information, so that they make better buying decisions.

The *why* is the most important part of the one-sentence lesson plan. As teachers, however, most of us overlook it. Yet this is the part students care about. When they know the purpose, they will absorb the topic more deeply (1). Yet too often we just assume students know why they’re learning a particular concept. Will students really know why they’re evaluating sources? Not necessarily.

Another reason to articulate the *why* is because it can help you open your lesson. For example, if “making better decisions” is one of the reasons we learn to evaluate the credibility of sources, then I can use that as a jumping off point. I might start the class by posing the following:

Class, say you want to buy a new flash drive. You want to make sure it has enough space to hold not just your school work but also your media, whether it’s pictures, videos, whatever. Also, the flash drive has to be reliable, because your last one died and you lost your paper! Finally, the flash drive has to be affordable, right?

I want you to take your phone right now and Google the words “best flash drive.” Which specific sites do you visit and why? Jot down your thoughts and reasons.

Now, students are making decisions about what to buy, as well as activating prior experiences related to buying. This will motivate them to learn about your content; in this case, how to evaluate the credibility of

sources.

Compare that opening with a more mundane, typical way one might start his/her lecture: “Today we’re going to learn how to evaluate the credibility of sources . . .”

Professors do this all the time—we introduce the content up front: “Let’s start by going over Piaget’s four stages of cognitive development . . .”

When we start with the content first, rather than with the *why*, we rob students of the opportunity to contextualize the topic. Asking students about their experiences buying a new flash drive will help them relate to the potentially dull topic of “evaluating the credibility of sources.” Research such as those by Ambrose et al. (2010) suggest that anchoring new topics to something familiar helps students learn more effectively (2).

Based on my one-sentence lesson plan, here’s a simple breakdown of my lecture:

- **Opening:** Ask students their experiences searching information on the Internet
- **Mini-lesson:** Teach them how to triangulate information (or better yet, start by asking them *better* ways to find information)
- **Guided practice:** Model your “think-aloud” as you demonstrate with a new topic (e.g., evaluating the credibility of sources related to climate change)
- **Activity:** Students apply the triangulating strategy (using their smartphone)
- **Closing:** Discuss why good judgement is important in the information age

All that from a one-sentence lesson plan.

According to marketing consultant Simon Sinek, the *why* drives behavior. In his bestselling book, *Start with Why*, Sinek argues that successful organizations understand that people won’t buy into whatever is being sold unless they understand why they’re doing it. Former Apple CEO Steve Jobs, for instance, didn’t just market computers (i.e., the *what*). He marketed the idea to challenge the status quo—to “think different” (the *why*).

Similarly, in education the *why* drives the desire to learn. Wouldn’t it be great if you had the answer to the age-old student complaint, “Why do we have to learn this?” With the one-sentence lesson plan, you’ll have the answer.

Here is the template:

*In this class, students will be able to [accomplish Outcome X] by [using Method Y], so that **they will be helped in Z way**.*

Is this like a learning objective?

One question professors often ask me is: *Isn’t the one-sentence lesson plan really just a learning or behavioral objective?*

Not quite. Learning or behavioral objectives may articulate the *what*, but

they don't always define the *how*. More importantly, typical objectives never define the *why*. The one-sentence lesson plan prioritizes the purpose (the *why*) as well as the method of learning (the *how*), which makes it more learner-centered. Furthermore, the one-sentence lesson plan leads into powerful lesson openings (and closings) that traditional objectives do not do.

I realize that the *why* isn't always easy to find. Why, for instance, do students need to identify the slope of a line in math? You have to get creative. Maybe to help them understand the rate of change? The key is to make the concept concrete, like looking at how money can grow over time. Students will want to know about that.

So, when you plan, start with the *what*. It's the easiest. But when you teach, start with the *why*.

With a one-sentence lesson plan, I can go in each day with a clear idea of *what* I want to teach, *how* I'm going to teach, and *why* I am teaching it. That means everything to a busy professor—and the overwhelmed student.

(1) Yeager, D. S., Henderson, M., Paunesku, D., Walton, G., Spitzer, B., D'Mello, S., & Duckworth, A. L. (2014). Boring but important: A self-transcendent purpose for learning fosters academic self-regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *107*, 559-580.

(2) Ambrose, S. A., Bridges, M. W., DiPietro, M., Lovett, M. C., & Norman, M. K. (2010). *How learning works: Seven research-based principles for smart teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Norman Eng, EdD, is the founder of EDUCATIONxDESIGN, Inc., which helps new professors teach more effectively through a system focused on students, rather than on content. Download your free quick start-guide, "7 Proven Steps to Planning, Teaching, and Engaging Your Students," at NormanEng.org.

Put Teaching First

By Matthew J. Wright, Ph.D.

www.facultyfocus.com

Universities are strange places. People pay thousands of dollars a year to be taught by supersmart people. These supersmart people are required to do research, write grants, and bring in money and resources to their university. Teaching is only a minor—almost insignificant—part of the job. While this often goes without saying at big R1 universities, it is surprising that this is all too often also true at smaller “teaching” colleges. At my home university, Adelphi, teaching is emphasized, but this is often the exception and not the rule.

Faculty members are generally happy to select out a few elite students who they are confident can make it all the way to the top. For these few bright and gifted students, the college experience becomes almost otherworldly. They do research projects with their professors, network with superstars in their field, travel to exotic locations, and give papers at major conferences. Their professors become role models and mentors who help them transition to greatness.

But remember, most of the professors are elite folks themselves. You have to be to make it through the maze that a typical professor endures to get to the coveted tenure-track positions. So, essentially, you end up with the top five percent of educated elites teaching to the top five percent of elite students.

That's messed up.

Here is how I have learned to teach to all students, not just the elite few:

- Ditch the stuffy, always-right professor and instead be the unsure, adventurer-ready-to-explore-new-topics one. I give open-ended questions on topics I don't even quite understand myself. Students will often ask for all the answers, but I reply, "I don't know, let's figure it out together." I believe that if students see their professor as a superstar genius, they can mistakenly think the barrier for their own success is too high.
- Share your own examples of struggling. Most faculty are ashamed of the time they flunked an exam. I proudly tell my students about bad scores. I share with them the time I got a D on my Physics II exam in college. (Of course, I also tell the students that was the last D I got as an undergrad. But the point is made.)
- Treat students like adults, not children. I respect them even when they do things that, to me, do not add up. I empathize with them, talk to them, and try to understand what they are thinking about. And that's every student—not just the top five percent, but every student at every desk.
- Use high-impact learning techniques. Research proves it helps all students, from the top percentile to the struggling ones, particularly in the sciences. Last semester, I took my class out on the lawn and asked them to work out the math for the number of blades of grass on the quad. I also brought students to the dance studio to demonstrate rotational torque. Aerial moves are best left to the Lindy Hoppers, but everyone in my class came away with a better understanding of a difficult concept.
- Create an active learning environment in the classroom. This is the key to having a successful environment for all students, particularly those with learning differences. (Do you have students with autism spectrum disorder or students who require accommodations in your classroom? Increasingly, I do.) In the classroom, I reward the courage to put out ideas, even if they are incorrect. "Get those ideas out there!" is my constant plea. "Courage first!" Then I calmly state, "Together, let's see if this makes sense."
- Discuss a point from multiple directions to promote learning—in some cases, this opens a door for many nontraditional students to walk through.
- Give individual students an opportunity to slow classes down and work at their own pace—without simultaneously lowering standards for everyone else.
- Push hard to provide opportunities—scholarships, research assistantships, and employment—for those students who are

working hard but do not have the highest grade point average. Access to these opportunities is life changing for any student; perhaps even more so for those who are not your top students. *Give them access.* Access gives them a future.

- Finally have fun with your students. No student, at any level, can learn in a boring environment.

There are some amazingly simple things we can do to make the switch, change our philosophy, and teach to every student. No matter what university or college you work at, or how important or successful your research is, the most important thing we do is teach.

Matthew J. Wright is an assistant professor of physics at Adelphi University. He was named the university's 2015 professor of the year and earned its 2016 outstanding teaching award for junior faculty.

Announcements

Raising Our Voices: Reclaiming the Narrative on the Value of Higher Education

2019 Annual Meeting

January 23, 2019 to January 26, 2019

Hyatt Regency Atlanta

265 Peachtree St NE

Atlanta, GA 30303

Wednesday, January 23

Pre-Meeting Symposium on the VALUE Approach to Assessment for Learning

Is There a Rubric for That?

A Decade of VALUE and the Future of Higher Education

Saturday, January 26

Forum on Digital Learning and ePortfolios

ePortfolios and the Value of Higher Education:

Celebrating 10 Years of AAC&U's ePortfolio Forum

About the Meeting

AAC&U's 2019 Annual Meeting will explore ways of elevating the voices of administrators, faculty, practitioners, and students in the public narrative about the value of higher education. Across the nation, the media, employers, state and national legislators, and community members in rural, urban, and suburban areas have questioned higher education's value for today's students and, at times, for society at large. The need is clear for higher education to reclaim the narrative and articulate our role in ensuring that all students achieve success in life, work, and citizenship and that American democracy continues to thrive.

Although their stories are often absent from the dominant public narrative, AAC&U member institutions, both two-year and four-year, are offering this type of education across majors and disciplines. These institutions have been working diligently to ensure that students gain transferable skills for lifelong learning that will enable them to contribute to their communities and to move from one job to another, as is the norm

in today's workforce. Even as societal divides among groups seem to be growing, AAC&U's members are offering programs and courses that require students to engage in challenging conversations with peers who may not agree with them. Many institutions are also ensuring that students gain the transferable skills they will need in a constantly changing and increasingly automated and digitized workforce, including by implementing high-impact practices that challenge students to integrate their learning in real-world situations and require them to apply and practice skills that employers, legislators, and community members value.

The 2019 Annual Meeting will highlight the innovations of member institutions that have implemented proven practices and programs that demonstrate why higher education is essential for students' future employability and for democratic vitality. Supported by clear evidence of the power of liberal education and bolstered by strong curricular and cocurricular models that advance student success, we must tell our own stories about the value of higher education for the students of today and tomorrow. By raising our voices, we can reclaim the narrative and communicate higher education's relevance in the workplace and society.

For more information to register for the meeting, please visit www.aacu.org.