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Character and Critical Thinking

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Professor Emerita Barbara Whitehead reflects on the connections between teachers and students as they work together to build character. One key insight she offers centers on the legacy of character building within and outside the Hampton University community.

Elements of character are personal and public as well as real and perceived. Associated with attributes and values that distinguish a person, group, organization, institution, or nation, the term *character* mirrors the ironic dualism of simplicity and complexity. While not using the word character by name, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's discussion of ethical behavior reflects how integral ethics is to the concept of character. Addressing the tension between ethics and reality, he observes in *Ethics*, "But the simple fact is that the ethical cannot be detached from reality, and consequently continual progress in learning to appreciate reality is a necessary ingredient in ethical action" (360) In contrast, Cicero, whose corpus of writings appears to lack the ethical rigor of an Aristotle or a Bonhoeffer states in *Ad Herennium* that, "good delivery ensures that what the orator is saying seems to come from the heart" (205). Exceptionally skilled with the ways and means of the emotional appeal, Cicero, when necessary, will settle for perception. Then there is Wallace Thurman in *Jesus and the Disinherited* asserting, "Uniqueness always escapes us as we undertake an analysis of character" (9).

Although writing with different objectives, Bonhoeffer, Cicero, and Thurman together help make a case for character as personal, public, real, and perceived. However, it is with Thurman's position regarding the relationship between uniqueness and character that I will make the leap to suggest that every teacher, whether deliberately or unwittingly, enters a classroom with propaganda in hand and mind. For those who might find slight discomfort with being described as a propagandist, other options for terminology exist, such as teaching philosophy or mission. Whatever the choice, teachers go into a classroom, laboratory, office, gymnasium, boat, bus, or aircraft with values and traits reflecting their character. In turn, what they are or seem to be can influence the development of attributes and values of their students. In addition, an educational setting exerts influence on professors themselves as they respond to the ethos of an environment in which they teach. For example, every institution of higher learning has a mission statement. Hampton University's is as follows:

Hampton University is a comprehensive institution of higher education, dedicated to the promotion of learning, building of character and preparation of promising students for positions of *leadership* and service. Its curriculum emphasis is scientific and professional with a strong liberal arts undergirding.

For purposes of this discussion, the most relevant section reads, "building of character

and preparation of promising students for positions of *leadership* and service.” These ideas are straightforward and not unduly difficult to accomplish, right? Maybe, maybe not. To teach with objectives to build and to prepare also implies another aim—to transform. How all of this is accomplished invites the consideration of subject matter, departmental affiliation, and resources. Still, the central agent to effect change is the instructor. Illustrations of how this may look are coming from the viewpoint of a retired professor who used to provide a “liberal arts undergirding.”

As an enabler of character development, a teacher does well to consider the dictum of Socrates “know thyself” and to be secure in that self-identity. What is at stake is the revelation of traits, such as consistency, honesty, commitment, confidence, empathy, respect and trustworthiness. To reflect values integral to leadership improves the chances of influencing those “promising” students who may be struggling with issues from a variety of sources, sometimes connected to family and friends. Their experiences may correspond to those of occupants in Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave*—living a reality that is created by shadows and reflections. It is the promising student the professor seeks to lead toward the light. Consider Thomas Fuller’s advice, “If you have knowledge, let others light their candles at it.” Of course, acquiring light is not without its challenges, challenges requiring a character defined by courage, determination, and expectations.

Regardless, character development must be nourished to withstand forces threatening a student’s sense of self. Even when a few behave as though they are undercover students, teachers have the responsibility to strive to treat all students as promising students whose potential may evolve at different times. In other words, approach each of them for his or her uniqueness of character. The speaker of Richard Wilbur’s poem “Still, Citizen Sparrow” supports this idea as he argues for a point of view alien to that of a sparrow’s, “you who dart in the orchard aisles.” Clearly associated with a conventional and privileged life of living among sweet smelling fruit trees, the sparrow has a problem with a different type of bird, “this vulture which you call unnatural.” Nevertheless, the speaker sees the vulture symbolizing heroism, “for it is he who devours death, mocks mutability, has heart to make an end, and keeps nature new.”

The speaker characterizes Noah as heroic as well. Both had the heart to carry out unpleasant, but essential assignments. The vulture’s was to cleanse nature; Noah’s, to survive a moral cleansing and begin anew without familiar faces of neighbors and friends. Perhaps some students may entertain thoughts on the subject of the environment and any other problems requiring action to improve a quality of life for all. Additionally, examples abound to encourage students to read more closely about the journeys of individuals who overcame opposition or personal challenges, such as Marie Curie, George Washington Carver, Franklin Roosevelt, Marian Anderson, Andrea Bocelli, the Tuskegee Airmen, Thurgood Marshall, James Earl Jones, Martin Luther King, and Arunima Sinha. They rode that tide to Ararat; they, too, are descendants of Noah.

To further engage in the life long process of character development, a student or two or three or more will need to break away from certain habits, relationships, situations, or pitches of billion-dollar industries developed to create dissatisfaction with one’s sense of self. Illustrating this need for transformation, Otis Moss III in the tradition of Carter G. Woodson treats the subject of “miseducation.” In chapter two of his book *The Gospel According to the Wiz and Other Sermons from Cinema*, Moss examines the miseducation of the scarecrow. Crows define good scarecrows as those who remain in their position of powerlessness. To ensure the success of their objectives, crows constantly seek means to persuade the scarecrow of his inferiority. Consequently, crows seek accolades of honor and superiority while the scarecrow is to forgo thoughts about enlightenment and liberation from a pole up his back.

This means, of course, that crows frown upon a scarecrow's effort to read because knowledge is a path to intellectual and behavioral freedom.

Crows interact with students through any means necessary to subvert the development of their potential. In order to offset this identity assault, students will find it necessary to develop an armor of critical thinking, critical listening, critical reading, and critical observing. Although Wayne C. Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* focuses on writing, the idea of the company students keep is relevant as they gather courage to rid themselves of ideas, habits, and relationships that keep them from developing their potential.

Of course, another aspect of character development is intellectual/academic integrity. To desire students to embrace academic integrity requires more than wishing that they would do so. Think about it. Academic integrity or any other type of integrity is challenging in the current atmosphere of shifting values. Integrity is under assault as the new normal can label dysfunction and duplicity by another name and make either one to appear acceptable. Increasingly, semantics in some quarters cease to matter. Ironically, to develop intellectual integrity as a character trait may not only be difficult but also the source of much resistance.

Intellectual integrity calls for preparation. Preparation calls for studying. Studying requires the establishment of priorities. Establishing priorities resists the temptation to cheat and plagiarize deliberately. If academic integrity challenges students, it may also test the integrity of teachers. When academic probation, a lost scholarship, or a perceived missed opportunity looms over the horizon, teachers see the tears, receive the telephone calls, and weather subtle and not-so-subtle forms of intimidation.

To forego some of the challenges just described, a teacher would do well to establish an atmosphere of intellectual integrity during the opening weeks of class. A perfect how-to-do-it guide does not exist. How the atmosphere is achieved varies according to the uniqueness of the professor's character, as well as a progression of experience and wisdom. Still, there are certain points to consider. Forgive the obvious.

Aside from extenuating circumstances, a professor goes to class with a syllabus. More than pages of expectations, grade distributions, and assignment dates, a syllabus provides guidelines for student success, which include opportunities to receive individualized attention during office hours. Two: as far as possible, create situations to achieve excellence. To quote Vince Lombardi, "The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to his commitment to excellence regardless of his chosen field of endeavor."

Of course, the pursuit of excellence is multifaceted, including a willingness to take risks. Realistically, to try something new can lead to failure or at a minimum disappointment. How student and teacher respond to them helps shape growth. Having a little wiggle room to take risks without adversely affecting a GPA can mean the difference between the comfort of the normal or the joy of the special. Three: teamwork can promote excellence. Not all students will embrace collaborative projects due to past experiences with those shirking responsibility and work. Effective teamwork allows students to draw on their strengths. It also validates constructive criticism as a means to excel. More than that, the rewards for planning, patience, and perseverance contribute to confidence and satisfaction. Four, technologies offer flexibility to enhance the learning process through national and global interaction with other students of various backgrounds and cultures. Students and teachers can become collaborators as they explore the new and different.

Building character is essential for servant-leaders as well as for those who implement another's vision. Uniqueness of character analysis may elude professors from time to time.

Nevertheless, entering a classroom with regard for individual students, subject matter, the maturation process, ethics, and the joy of teaching will be more than adequate. A measure of this capability is reflected in the lives of students who continue the legacy of influencing character development in others.

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Announcements

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Weekly Liberal Education News Watch

Week of February 18-22, 2019

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Nearly Half of Undergraduates Are Students of Color. But Black Students Lag Behind.

[The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)

The key data points in the American Council on Education's [new report](#) on race and ethnicity in higher education come as no surprise: College-student populations are growing more diverse, yet achievement gaps persist among different racial groups. [Read more >>](#)

Barnard's President Aims to Serve an Increasingly STEM-Focused Student Body

[Crain's New York Business](#)

Books are still important. But the idea that people interested in arts and humanities should be in one spot and computer scientists in another just doesn't reflect how we think and do our best work. You need those interests within the same student. So creating spaces where students can fuse those interests together and gain skills for the jobs of the future is really important. [Read more >>](#)

The Path Across America's Divide Starts at Its Colleges

[The Chronicle of Higher Education Trends Report](#)

"Ultimately, however, academic institutions and polarized communities will need to build on deep listening and honest conversation to create new relationships of trust, action, and problem-solving across their purple seams. This won't mean setting aside conflicts of race and class, religious values, and sexuality in order to get along—just the opposite. It will mean recognizing the similarities, differences, and conflicts that campuses and communities share, and undertaking the hard work of confronting them together," writes David Scobey, director of Bringing Theory to Practice, a national initiative that supports civic engagement and other core purposes of undergraduate education through innovative projects and institutional change.

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What Is 'Indoctrination'? And How Do We Avoid It in Class?

[The Chronicle of Higher Education](#)

The idea that professors indoctrinate students is actually a very old accusation. But there are teaching strategies you can use to be sure you are promoting open-mindedness. [Read more >>](#)

Harvard College Unveils Working Group to Implement Inclusion and Belonging Report

[The Harvard Crimson](#)

Harvard College announced the creation of a new working group charged with examining how spaces and symbols on campus impact the student body and exploring new avenues for diversity-related programming Tuesday morning. Ali S. A. Asani '77, a professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic religion and cultures, will chair the group, called the Working Group on Symbols and Spaces of Engagement. He will work with undergraduates alongside other faculty and staff to "examine how our campus spaces, symbols, and programming advance an inclusive learning environment," according to its mission. [Read more >>](#)



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