A Whole-Context Approach to Intellectual Virtues Education

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In *Deep in Thought,* Jason Baehr provides a clear guide for why, what, and how intellectual virtues (IVs) education works in the classroom. Baehr presents the book not as a new approach, but rather a way to increase the confidence of faculty and in teaching for IVs. My area of academic expertise is within character measurement and character development within the college context. As an assessment person, I was excited to see Baehr's attention to how faculty and students might track and understand their progress in developing the capacities of a good learner.

As I read this book, a question came to mind: Who else is reading it? The likely audience for this book is not the group of educators who most need it. Those of us who desire to create safe, meaningful, highly connected learning environments likely already have "something to work with," so to speak, when it comes to how we orient ourselves in the classroom. But many overworked teachers are less able or less apt to scrutinize their pedagogical approaches.

Imagine that I am the only faculty member at my institution who reads, or cares to read, this book. I create the perfect environment to facilitate the development of IVs: I develop a classroom where students trust one another and can be vulnerable, where students desire to develop their capacity for virtue, and where they have ample opportunity to practice and assess those capacities. Now imagine they leave my classroom, one of five courses they will take this semester and one of forty they will take during their time in college, and in all the other thirty-nine courses they are welcomed by arrogant, aloof, uncaring faculty and students.

It is easy to feel defeated by the system, because, after all, what can one drop in the proverbial bucket do? Other colleagues' indifference to teaching for the IVs detracts from the stickiness, so to speak, of such pedagogy outside the walls of a particular classroom, which reduces the likelihood that students in that classroom will adopt a lifelong orientation toward learning. Situations like these can produce an attitude of learned helplessness despite the best intentions and the wisest implementation.

Now, I must admit, this nightmare is perhaps an exaggeration, if not a completely foreign picture, to most faculty. Although disinterested faculty exist everywhere, it is unlikely that all faculty except one have a disdain for the core requirements of their profession. Rather, a more common argument of faculty at an institution is that teaching for character of any sort is not their job. I point to a colleague of mine at the United States Military Academy (USMA), Dr. Stephen Finn, who recently wrote an article in the *Military Review* regarding obligations of faculty to students. USMA has a mission statement to graduate "a commissioned leader of character," and yet—Finn tells his reader—"when it comes to providing advice to instructors on developing their students' characters, I am more reluctant to speak."[1] Some of his reluctance stems from a lack of knowledge of character development, but most comes from a belief that character development should be avoided in the classroom. According to Finn, the primary function of faculty is students' intellectual and academic development. In brief, Finn cares about his students' learning, but he does not see character development as a component of his job.

Finn outlines three major points. First, "The task of character development belongs *primarily* to administrative departments of an institution and to a subset of faculty." Second, "Faculty members can and should use methods and techniques to develop students' character in the classroom but only when doing so requires minimal training and little class time." And third, "Faculty members should focus on the academic and intellectual development of their students as the best way to indirectly shape student characters."

Often, this is where faculty are. They feel some combination of not feeling "expert enough" to develop character, and/or they feel that it is not their primary obligation as a faculty member anyway. Thankfully, Baehr's book provides an inroad to showing faculty who care about student learning that they must also care, then, about students' character formation in the IVs.

My reason for being concerned about faculty members who might agree with Finn (and see themselves as the "more realistic" actors in academia) is that the whole system within which the student lives needs to be dedicated to convincing the student that the goals set in a classroom are valuable beyond it. Psychologists often use Urie Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model to convey this point. Within the model, there are a series of concentric circles, with the smallest one in the middle, representing the individual. Each circle outside of the "individual" is a broader and broader context in which the individual is embedded, including family, friend groups, and schools, to political systems and religion.[2] This systems model

highlights that the best way to influence an individual is to ensure that a concept or cultural value is sustained and encouraged at every level of the system. Education for the IVs is no different.

Baehr recommends a bottom-up approach to developing curricula around IVs. According to him,

> at its best, teaching for intellectual virtues involves significant student buy-in… It requires that our efforts as teachers be sensitive to and informed by who our students are… Because these things are likely to vary significantly from one group of students to another, teaching for intellectual virtues must be approached in an organic or bottom-up way.[3]

I agree with him when it comes to the context of a *classroom*. But the work of committing as a department, or even as an institution, to educating for the IVs seems to require top-down clarity that a primary institutional mission is to cultivate the attributes of lifelong learning. Students and faculty can use this commitment as a guidepost for creating courses, engaging in learning experiences, and holding one another accountable.

In his recent book *PRIMED for Character Education*, Marvin Berkowitz introduces a six-component acronym that encompasses the major aspects of successful character education, as based on multiple systematic reviews of K-12 character programs. Character education must be a Priority, Relationship-building, Intrinsically motivated, Modeling goodness, Empowering students, and Developmental.[4] If IV development becomes a priority for an institution, then all of these other five components of good character education follow. For I then have a responsibility to build relationships, tap into the intrinsic motivation in my students, model goodness, and empower my students to own their formation.

Baehr focuses on what can be done within a single classroom. By contrast, a whole-system approach requires that individuals outside of an individual faculty member's jurisdiction come together and decide on the common, IV-focused frame through which the institution can commit to an orientation other than pure knowledge transfer. But how can faculty start to encourage a whole-system embrace of IVs and influence the culture as well as the individual classroom? I have to say, with intellectual humility, I'm not entirely sure. Perhaps it's by continuing with the bottom-up approach and slowly engaging other faculty to embrace the framework of IVs as good teaching.

Baehr remarks that the best education happens in "the context of respectful and caring relationships,"[5] but that doesn't stop at our relationship

with our students. Proponents of educating for the IVs need to engage colleagues respectfully and caringly. As Baehr repeats time and again, we must be stewards of what we teach.

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[1] Stephen J. Finn, "Developing Leaders of Character: Whose Job Is It?" *Military Review* (April 2023), online at https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/online-exclusive/2023-ole/finn/.

[2] Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Ecological Systems Theory," in *Annals of Child Development*, vol. 6., ed. R. Vasta (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1989), 187–249.

[3] Jason Baehr, *Deep in Thought: A Practical Guide to Teaching for Intellectual Virtues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2021), 61.

[4] Marvin W. Berkowitz, *PRIMED for Character Education: Six Design Principles for School Improvement* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

[5] Baehr, *Deep in Thought*, 60.

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