"I Don't Know": Humanizing Academia by Modeling Intellectual Humility

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> "To know our intellectual character strengths and limitations, we must spend some time reflecting on the geography of our own minds."[1]

Jason Baehr began his 2023 Grimes Lecture at King's College with the question, "What is the ultimate point or purpose of our work with students?" His answer, in short, was to foster students' intellectual character much as Plato's Socrates sought to do: by helping students to *turn around*. Baehr explained further by quoting Plato: "Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes…. [E]ducation is the craft concerned with doing…this *turning around*, and how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it."[2]

My response to Baehr is one part pedagogy-in-praxis and another part precision. When he asks about "the ultimate point or purpose of our work with students," how does he define "our" and "students" in the question? As a new faculty member concerned with teaching for intellectual virtue, my specific interest is a more precise exploration of pedagogical implementations by academic level. To that end, I offer the following curious questions:

- How might the differences between the pedagogical training of K-12 teachers and university professors be taken into consideration for how to teach for intellectual virtue(s)?
- How does the level of an instructor—K-12, adjunct, junior, or tenured faculty—matter in modeling intellectual virtue, most particularly intellectual humility?

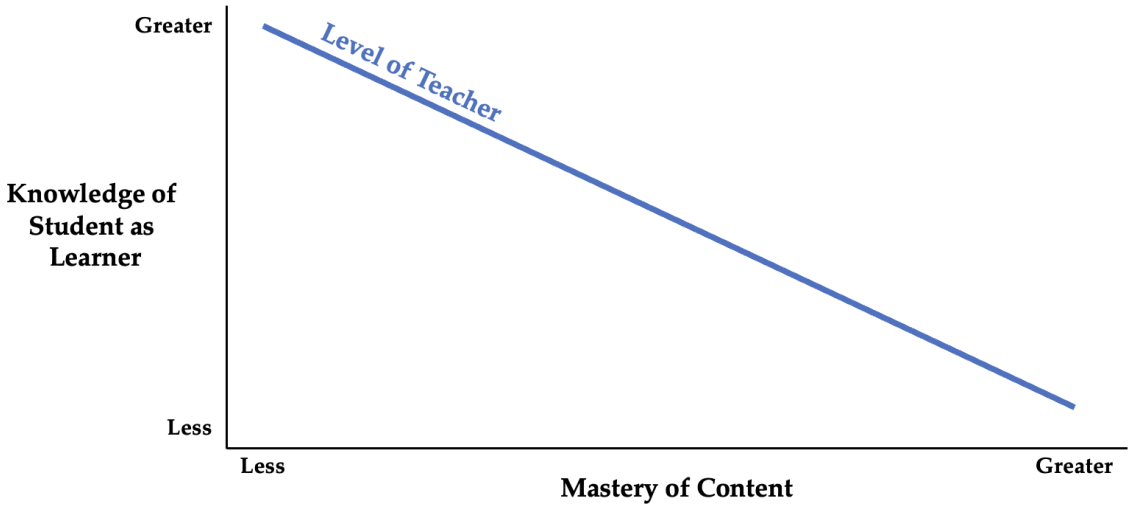
In *Deep in Thought*, Baehr draws frequently on the diverse experiences of K-12 teachers as reflected in the research literature, as well as on the public charter middle school he co-founded, Intellectual Virtues Academy of Long Beach. My inquiry into Baehr's guidance for teaching for intellectual virtues

focuses on how the purpose of instruction changes given the differences of pedagogical training, student expectations, and the nature of the classroom at large.

"Our" as University Faculty

The term *teachers* is much too broad when considering the purpose and complex practicality of developing *students'* intellectual character. First, the pedagogical training of teachers—elementary, secondary, higher education—is pointedly different by level, discipline, and ability. There seems to be an opposing relationship between knowledge of students and mastery of content as teachers progress in pedagogical training by level. The nature of teaching, and the levels within, are dependent on expertise. I propose that there are two types of expertise at play here. One is the content; the other is an understanding of the learner. I diagram this relationship in Figure 1. For instance, the amount of time teachers-in-training spend understanding the learner as kindergartener versus a chemistry Ph.D. seeking to be an assistant professor learning about the cognitive development of undergraduates is radically uneven.

Figure 1. Proposed Model of Student-Content Pedagogical Training by Level



Let us consider just one of the intellectual virtues, and how to teach for and model it, namely, intellectual humility. Intellectual humility is the

intellectual virtue concerned with one's awareness and ownership of intellectual limitations, gaps, and errancies: in short, a virtuous ability to admit "I don't know" or "I was wrong." Research on intellectual humility and how to cultivate it, especially in the classroom, is still in the early stages. Most researchers agree, as Baehr remarks, that intellectual humility is "one of the most important intellectual virtues."[3] Some have gone so far as to suggest humility as foundational for the other virtues to exist.[4]

For the past three years, I have researched the process of modeling intellectual humility in undergraduate education from the perspective of tenured faculty.[5] Currently, I am analyzing over fifty interviews across multiple universities, where my faculty participants capture a diversity of range in number of years teaching (7-50), academic community and discipline (arts & humanities, sciences, and business), gender (50 percent female), and self-reported intellectual humility (39 percent scored in the top quartile by academic community).[6] My analysis of tenured faculty's pedagogy has yielded a broad understanding of how the virtue of intellectual humility is practically modeled in their classrooms, including interactions with students. Most faculty understood intellectual humility as central to their work, but had not been fully introduced to the concept. A common refrain from faculty reflecting on their pedagogy was: "I did not know it had a name." They also often commented: "This explains how I think about my teaching."

Regardless of gender, rank, or discipline, university faculty described the display of their limits as modeling for students: (a) what life-long learning looks like and (b) how to respond appropriately to failure. They also spoke of displaying their limits as (c) humanizing themselves to their students. A female professor of Geology who had taught for more than twenty years summarized this well:

> We're trying to raise not academics, but we're trying to raise learners. And the whole point of raising learners is for them to see that you're also a learner, and that you're still learning. That learning is a lifelong process.

My research also found, however, that while teachers gauge their students' intellectual aptitudes—including their humility—in the classroom, they rarely measure their own propensity to be humble. Intellectual humility is manifested via the professor's *living* pedagogy. Yet, university faculty are trained to be knowledgeable and competent, not intellectually humble in identifying the boundaries of their knowledge or the needs of today's university student. Further, some professors perceive their gender, age, and/or

tenure status as obstacles to displaying intellectual errancies. Intellectual humility is perceived as a privilege for some, but a threat to others.

Modeling Intellectual Humility

Expertise does not protect teachers from intellectual vice. Expertise, in fact, can cloud some into mistaking their intellectual folly as virtue.[7] When faced with their own ignorance, there is a great temptation for some teachers to double down on their expertise. Students who do not find intellectual humility in their professors will not fret, for in today's digitized classroom they have ample access to unending social media feeds to wander away. In other words, students are proficient at ignoring intellectual arrogance. Baehr's message to teachers is clear: it's not *whether* but *which* intellectual virtues, or vices, we model to students. His list of intellectual vices is instructive: "intellectually careless, arrogant, indifferent, superficial, distracted, narrow-minded, or dogmatic."[8] Our students are wise to recognize these attitudes or behaviors in faculty, but often powerless to help their professor improve. They instead take to websites like "Rate My Professor/Teacher" and "Uloop" to comment on professors' (un)helpfulness, clarity, and intellectual ability. In essence, students rate how well their professors' model intellectual virtue.

What does modeling intellectual humility require of professors? Intellectual humility sounds like the admission of "I don't know" or "I was wrong." But phrases like these have a likely probability of being misconstrued, or worse misjudged. Faculty with higher teaching loads stated that it was not in their interest to share gaps in their thinking for fear of receiving poor student evaluations. Without guiding principles, the admission of an intellectual limitation can seem like a mistake.

Baehr advises teachers to be authentic, to be self-aware, and to foster an ethos of trust and acceptance.[9] In the university context, I would add a guiding principle of empathy for the needs of current undergraduates and how an 18-year-old experiences your pedagogy. Authenticity and self-awareness are teacher-focused, but modeling intellectual virtues also requires a focus on the student learner.

Here are a few of the skills or behaviors associated with modeling intellectual humility. Some are outlined by Baehr; I have added a few. When confronted with a gap or errancy in their thinking, intellectually humble professors will:

- Admit what they don't know.
- Not "bend over backwards to conceal" their ignorance.

- Have the courage to admit their ignorance.
- Remain "comfortable with their intellectual limitations."
- At times, ask for help.
- Be willing "to learn from others, including their students."
- When appropriate, "take intellectual risks."
- Take the opportunity to wonder and think aloud.
- Take care in the excellence of their reasoning.[10]

Intellectual humility is so central to the classroom, especially for university educators, because of what it models for young people: for example, life-long learning and how to respond to failure.

Intellectual humility should never be forced or perfunctory. Most students by the time they enter college are socialized well enough to the classroom to know when their instructor is acting inauthentically or insensitively. Professors face a challenge to own what they do not know, while keeping a reputation as experts-scholars in their field. The pedagogical basis for modeling as a practice requires intellectual courage to think and wonder out loud. This process takes a considerable amount of reflection. As part of the Oxford Character Project, Michael Lamb, Jonathan Brant, and Edward Brooks identify reflection on personal experience and engagement with virtuous exemplars as two of seven strategies to cultivate virtue.[11] Reflection in the form of a pedagogical pause is a complementary strategy for intellectually humble faculty.

Conclusion

If polled, most teachers would conclude that their ultimate purpose is grander than the successful transmission of knowledge and information to their students. Baehr taps into this mindset. He expands teachers' understanding of their purpose to include how to "model an active and inquisitive mind" vis-à-vis the habituation of intellectual virtues.[12] When asked how best to educate our young people, those outside character education may not think to say *with intellectual humility*. However, a few answers you are likely to receive are to represent life-long learning, respond well to setbacks, and humanize the process of learning. "When we encounter people who are curious, attentive, open-minded, intellectually autonomous, or intellectually courageous," as Baehr writes, "it is only natural for us to want to be like them—to emulate their concerns and dispositions."[13] Modeling intellectual virtue is the most salient way for university professors to start.

University professors' character—most especially their *intellectual* virtues and vices—are always on full display to students. Our students are

the first to witness and respond to them. Our colleagues become the beneficiaries of our intellectual character, and on bad days they pay for it. Unfortunately, hiring for teachers' intellectual character—not to mention moral or performance character—is not common policy or easily implemented. Yet, universities, and those who lead and teach in them, should concern themselves with the practices, skills, motivations, and behaviors of the intellectual virtues, such as intellectual humility. All would be well served to follow Baehr's call.

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[1] Jason Baehr, *Deep in Thought: A Practical Guide to Teaching for Intellectual Virtues* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 168.

[2] Plato, *Republic*, book VII, quoted in Nicholas D. Smith, *Summoning Knowledge in Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.

[3] Baehr, *Deep in Thought*, 161.

[4] See Bradley P. Owens et al., "Expressed Humility in Organizations: Implications for Performance, Teams, and Leadership," *Organization Science* 24, no. 5 (2013): 1517–38; Jennifer Cole Wright et al., "The Psychological Significance of Humility," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 1 (2016): 3–12; and Jennifer Cole Wright, "Humility as a Foundational Virtue," in *Humility*, ed. Jennifer Cole Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 146–74.

[5] Johann F. Ducharme, *The Power & Process of Owning Intellectual Limitations: A Grounded Theory of Intellectual Humility in Undergraduate Education* (Publication No. 28714567, 2021 [Doctoral dissertation, The College of William & Mary]), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

[6] Tenured faculty members from multiple institutions served as study participants. These institutions are highly selective, mid-sized, public and private, liberal arts and sciences universities with a Research 2 (R2) Carnegie classification. Based on a grounded theory approach, data was generated and analyzed via a descriptive survey (*n=181*) and a 60-90 minute semi-structured, one-on-one, virtual interview (*n=52*), later transcribed, coded, and member-checked with all participants. Every interview is going through this process to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's perceptions pertaining to the research topic. Twenty percent of the coded transcriptions will be peer-debriefed with external scholars to ensure the quality and robustness of the data.

[7] See Amy Olberding's article "Righteous Incivility," *Aeon*, September 5, 2019, https://aeon.co/essays/whats-the-difference-between-being-righteous-and-being-rude, where she describes "counterfeit virtues" as "near enemies—seductive, plausible counterfeits that closely resemble the virtues but are nonetheless distortions of it."

[8] Baehr, *Deep in Thought*, 159.

[9] Ibid., 167–70.

[10] Ibid., 161–65.

[11] Michael Lamb, Jonathan Brant, and Edward Brooks, "Seven Strategies for Cultivating Virtue in the University," in *Cultivating Virtue in the University*, ed. Lamb, Brant, and Brooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 115–56. See further the Oxford Character Project, https://oxfordcharacter.org/, and the Program for Leadership & Character, https://leadershipandcharacter.wfu.edu/.

[12] Baehr, *Deep in Thought*, 165.

[13] Ibid., 158.