

34 Developing the virtuous learning character

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NT Wright

What approach should we take to developing the character of our students in accordance with our uniquely Christian vision of the future which looks forward to the new creation, the bringing together of heaven and earth in one reality? This question requires us to reconsider once again what should be the purpose of education, and more specifically, the purpose of Christian education.

In a book titled *What's the Point of School*,¹ Guy Claxton challenges the idea that the purpose of schools is to transmit knowledge and information to students. Instead, he argues that schools should be places that teach students how to learn. Schools should teach students about how to deal with uncertainty, what steps they can take even when they do not know how to solve a particular problem. Schools should build resilient learners who are not put off by initial difficulties, but persevere when faced with challenging problems, resourceful and reflective learners who know how to learn in teams and individually. This emphasis on teaching students how to learn, Claxton argues, should

be evident in each classroom as students learn about Shakespeare, the periodic table and quadratic equations.

The development of students' capacity to learn, associated with approaches such as 'Building Learning Power', 'Visible Thinking' and 'Habits of Mind', represents a significant challenge for educators today. There is a growing awareness of the need to reshape education towards a focus on preparing students to be lifelong learners, and approaches such as these represent important frameworks designed specifically to achieve this goal. But the purpose of learning activity within Christian schools needs to reflect the specifically Christian vision of human flourishing found in the New Testament—a vision that focuses on the development of Christian character, encouraging specific behaviours and habits that result in the formation of character and the development of Christian virtues.

This chapter will examine ways of building a learning community with the specific goal of developing *learning character* informed by the vision of human flourishing found in the New Testament. *Learning character* refers to the interplay between the students' developing capacity to learn and the formation of character. Developing learning character will result in more than just students who are powerful learners—it will result in students whose learning is characterised by a deep sense of compassion, grace, kindness, humility and justice.

Expansive education

The model of developing learning character fits within the body of approaches to education described by Lucas, Claxton and Spencer as 'expansive education' (2013). Drawing on Yrjö Engeström's notion of 'learning by expanding',² Lucas, Claxton and Spencer identify many current approaches to education which seek to do four things. Expansive approaches to education, first, adopt goals that extend beyond conventional achievement on examinations; second, expand on our notions of intelligence and the kinds of dispositions that will enable young people to succeed at school and throughout their lives; third, see learning as something which takes place in many different contexts as well as the classroom; and fourth, recognises that teachers also have the capacity to be ongoing, enthusiastic learners as well.

There are many expansive approaches currently being implemented across different countries using a range of conceptual frameworks within which to describe the process of learning and associated ideas about intelligence, mindsets and culture. They include Project Zero run through Harvard University,³ Art Costa's Habits of Mind framework⁴ and approaches focused on teaching philosophy to young children.

The term 'expansive education' refers to a unique aspect of educational activities when compared with other human activities. All human activities, according to Engeström (1987), involve the transforming of objects to achieve outcomes that meet human needs. Unlike other human activities where the object is typically some material good or service transformed to meet a human need, educational activities focused on learning (as distinct from educational activities focused on 'schoolwork') have as their objects for transformation the members of this community of practice themselves. Drawing on Marx's interpretation of Hegel's dialectic, Engeström argues that human activities evolve over time in an attempt to resolve the fundamental production/consumption dialectic. But in expansive learning activities, the production/consumption dialectic resolves into a synthetic unity that drives the activity to a point of expansion or generation, producing new forms of human activity that have been made possible by the strengthening of learning capacity. Students at school grow and mature to be people who are able to participate in *other* forms of human activity that exist separate to the original learning activity.

The purpose of schooling, therefore, could be described as the process of recognising what characterises the human activities that our students will one day be engaged in, and what learning character will best prepare them for these activities. This definition of purpose summarises the purposes of all educational practice, Christian or otherwise. But what are the human activities that our students will one day be engaged in? We may answer this question with reference to our understanding of life in the twenty-first century and identify the ways in which our current practice needs to change away from transmission approaches to learning towards participatory approaches. Certainly, this is the intention of expansive approaches to education outlined earlier.

For us, however, as people of the Kingdom of God who look forward to the restoration of all things, there is a much larger picture of the

types of human activities that students could be engaged in, associated with their participation in the new heavens and the new earth. With this understanding of the future, we seek to develop students' learning character, teaching them the 'language of heaven'⁵ in anticipation of this eschaton evident throughout the Bible. While not all students will choose to be a part of this new creation, the speaking of this language by teachers, other students and staff creates an opportunity within our schools for students from different faith backgrounds to gain an insight into God's plans and purposes for creation. The speaking of this language also challenges the dominant tongues of our age that speak of individuality, self-fulfilment and greed. It has the potential to generate ways of thinking, acting and doing that communicate something of God's character and the virtues that will characterise the coming kingdom of God.

Identifying strengths or developing the whole person

How, then, might schools pursue the development of learning character? There are two different possibilities suggested by different approaches. The first is to provide a context within which the character strengths of young people are encouraged to grow. The second is to identify the character strengths that are important to a particular community and to put into place strategies for developing these character strengths.

The character strengths approach suggests that the best way to educate young people is to encourage existing strengths to grow and flourish in individuals, like a gardener providing the conditions for a plant to grow according to its nature. The role of the teacher is to identify the character strengths of each student, building up different strengths in different students. In contrast to this approach of 'playing to one's strengths', the approach of 'Building Learning Power' views each of the dispositions as appropriate to promote with *all* students. Claxton et al.⁶ describe these dispositions as muscles which need to be exercised individually, but all contribute to the development of powerful learning.

In a similar manner, Paul encourages his readers to put on the whole range of virtues—we cannot seek to become experts in one area (such as kindness) while neglecting to be self-controlled or gentle.

Christian education, therefore, is about developing the *whole* person so that all students, irrespective of their character strengths or weaknesses, have an opportunity to put on each of the different virtues that characterise the Christian vision of a restored humanity. While all students are encouraged to become better learners within the framework offered by Building Learning Power, students are also encouraged to become people who reflect the character of Jesus. All students, therefore, are encouraged to become better collaborators and better at learning independently. All students have opportunities to develop their capacity to think logically and all students are encouraged to imagine new possibilities. As well as becoming better learners, all students are encouraged to consider how they might become people of compassion and grace.

Claxton and colleagues regularly describe the classroom as a learning gym in which different 'learning muscles' are exercised at different times: '[*Building Learning Power*] ... uses our knowledge of learning and the mind to create a coherent picture of the kinds of mental agility and emotional stamina the good learner has, and to make sure that schools give all these aspects the work-outs they need in order to develop'.⁷

We often use the analogy of a fitness coach in a gym. Such coaches are able to construct broad, balanced and effective exercise regimes that will help people get fitter, because they have a model of what the different ingredients are that go to make up 'fitness'. They can get us to work on all those things, and gradually, in concert, they add up to improved fitness.⁸

This same fitness metaphor is adopted by Wright (2010) to describe the process of character formation through habits of practice: 'Working on one or two (muscles) isn't enough: there's no point having super-fit legs while the rest of the body is flabby, for example, In the same way a complete and flourishing human being needs all the basic strengths of character ... The "virtues" are the different strengths of character which together contribute to someone becoming a fully flourishing human being.'⁹

The activities that students engage in, therefore, both inside and outside the classroom, can be designed to promote the development of habits, dispositions, ways of acting and thinking that can become character-forming over time. All students should have opportunities to

build their learning character whether they (or us) identify these characteristics as strengths or weaknesses. While students might pursue their own individual interests within different areas of the curriculum and develop expertise specific to their interests (what might be described as finding their 'element' by Sir Ken Robinson),¹⁰ all students are encouraged to become more powerful learners and people committed to the project of restoring a broken world.

Peterson and Seligman¹¹ make a similar case for the necessary development of virtues. They identify six virtues which are related to twenty-four character traits—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. 'Good character' requires the development of each of the six virtues they identify, drawing on a range of cultural, spiritual and ethical traditions (reflecting closely Aristotle's four cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, justice and courage). But Peterson and Seligman and their colleagues, in the development of their 'signature strengths' approach suggest that the existing character strengths of individuals provide the initial focus of teachers' attention as they attempt to strengthen students' character. The approach described here as the development of learning character challenges teachers to promote each of the different elements of learning character, building up the learning capacity of each student irrespective of their strengths and weaknesses.

Pathways to character formation

Tom Wright identifies within the New Testament an ongoing discussion about the formation of character.¹² The key to the development of virtues, according to Wright, is the transforming of the heart and mind. It is not by following rules that we become truly human, nor is it by simply being true to our inner selves. The first way involves identifying rules for living within the biblical writings and then obeying such rules to the best of our ability. The second is to reject the notion of rule-following, instead living 'authentically' by being true to our inner selves which have been transformed by the Spirit of God.

Wright plots a third path which brings together these perspectives within a theory of virtue. Rules and guidelines help us to know what types of behaviours are more likely to build the character associated

with the kingdom of God. But the end result is not primarily obedience (although obedience is an outcome), but the transforming of our character is such that our inner being is characterised by love, faith, hope, compassion, kindness, humility and gentleness. However, this is our second nature rather than our first, and it only becomes second nature over a considerable period of time. Appealing to our inner selves as a guide for ethical decisions represents an unwarranted short cut. Yes, the end result for those who await the coming new creation is a renewed heart and mind such that we reflect the character of God in this world. But the transforming of our hearts and minds does not happen overnight—indeed, it could take a lifetime.

Developing the virtuous learning character

How, then, can schools be places that promote the Christian virtues of love, kindness, patience, self-control, grace, compassion, humility and seeking justice? Requiring adherence to a code of conduct is unlikely to change people's character. Nor can we expect that students will simply know within themselves how to live in a manner that reflects the character of the kingdom of God. The third path suggested by Wright involves promoting behaviours (which would be described by Peterson and Seligman as situational themes) that become habit-forming, resulting in the transforming of character. In the context of schooling, therefore, character formation can occur through students (and teachers) engaging in carefully-designed learning activities which, over time, result in the transforming of its participants. As with the current emphasis on twenty-first century learning, we need to be open to replacing our transmission approaches to learning and development focused on rules by participatory models that view character development occurring within a community of practice.

In *Virtue Reborn*, Wright identifies five related elements of Christian communities associated with virtue formation that he locates around a *circle of virtue*. Each element informs the next element around the circle such that it doesn't matter where someone starts in this circle of virtue—eventually, all five elements will come into play to provide a context within which the people of God are challenged and encouraged

to become people of Christian virtue. These five elements are outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Wright outlines how these five elements operate and interact with each other in healthy Christian communities—typically in the form of church communities. However, these five elements are also evident in schools that see their role as sharing the vision of the ‘complete’ humanity outlined in the New Testament. Schools whose purpose, character and practices are shaped by the teachings of Jesus provide a context within which habit formation and subsequent character development are possible, incorporating the same five elements identified by Wright.

The first element identified by Wright (common to churches and schools) are their ‘texts’ or ‘voices’. Just as churches come together around the reading of scripture, so schools have their own ‘texts’ or ‘voices’ (using the notion of voices from Bakhtin’s theory of dialogical spaces¹³ that promote habits of mind in particular) and ways of doing that are foundational for the development of character. Many of these voices are heard through scripture in Christian schools, through the teaching of the Bible and conversations about the Christian world view that emerge from the biblical story. Unlike most churches, however, schools are communities in

which multiple voices contribute to the learning conversation. This conversation may include the voice of scripture, alongside other voices drawn from scientific communities, historians, geographers, scholars in many different fields as well as the voices of teachers and students. This conversation can be shaped, prompted and directed towards the development of learning character.

The second element identified by Wright is the sharing of stories.

Claxton describes the activity of teaching as an ‘epistemic apprenticeship’¹⁴. Whether we do so intentionally or unintentionally, teachers communicate certain beliefs about learning. Is the practice of learning mathematics, for example, about avoiding making errors, or is it about taking risks and exploring where different ideas might lead? Teachers regularly tell stories that communicate beliefs about students’ capacity to improve their understanding—whether our learning capacities are relatively fixed, or whether it is always possible for us to develop as learners. Teachers also tell students stories about how learning occurs (intentionally and unintentionally). Does learning occur primarily through drill and practice, through the communication of ideas with others, or by asking the teacher what the correct answer is? Claxton argues that all teachers, whether they are conscious of it or not, are ‘epistemic coaches’, training students to think about learning in a particular way. He suggests that teachers need to be conscious epistemic coaches, identifying those learning dispositions which they are trying to build up in students each lesson. He argues for a ‘split-screen’ approach to each lesson where teachers are encouraged to consider how they might teach content and strengthen dispositions known to support learning.

Similarly, all teachers communicate something about *learning character*, intentionally or unintentionally. Sometimes we do this through the feedback we provide students (see Julia McGonigle’s chapter for a discussion on how feedback is related to character development). We do this through the stories we tell about the benefits of learning. Students may be encouraged, for example, to approach their learning as a pathway to personal empowerment, increasing their chances of happiness and prosperity later in life. Or they might view learning as a pathway to a life of service, whereby

their skills, knowledge and capacities can provide support and comfort to other people.

Learning might be viewed as an individual endeavour in which each individual is competing with those around them to gain the 'rewards' of learning (which might be in the form of grades, acceptance into a university course, or simply the praise of the classroom teacher). Or our individual learning could be seen as a process intimately linked with the learning of those around us and that we learn best when we learn from and teach each other. Finally, learning might be connected with our self-image and ego, or it might be an outworking of our intellectual humility. The stories that we tell about 'learning power' as a means of self-advancement or as a means of serving others provide powerful insights into the values and virtues that are most valued within our school culture.

The third element is students follow examples, most notably their teachers. We model how to interact with different conceptual ideas each lesson, but more importantly we model what learning looks like in our various disciplines. Our learning practice informs our students' practice. What do we do when we get stuck? How do we deal with the fact that our understanding of each subject area is also incomplete? We need to model the same learning character that we hope our students will one day exhibit, being intellectually humble, people who ask questions that extend our thinking, who collaborate with others displaying grace and compassion rather than arrogance and ego. We need to be people who listen to our students to hear their perspectives and value these perspectives as sources of new ways of understanding our subject area, approaching our learning as an opportunity to become a voice for justice in the world.

The fourth element in Wright's circle of virtue development is engagement in a community. As we reflect on our goal of building learning character, we seek to establish communities of practice within which students (and teachers) are able to transform themselves, growing in understanding and maturity.

The fifth element in Wright's circle of virtue is a common language to talk about learning character and establishing common practices in each class. This language associated with learning character should be evident across the school such that all members of the school community recognise that 'learning' and 'growing as people of character' are features of the school community, not just for students, but for all participants in this community of practice—as teachers, parents and other staff working within the school are also encouraged to be people of grace, compassion, humility and justice.

In summary, learning character is promoted in schools in many different ways. Teachers model learning character, encourage students to adopt different aspects of learning character, tell stories about what 'good' learning involves and promote the development of learning communities that are characterised by expansive learning activities which have as their outcome the development of learning character. Schools support the development of such communities of practice through the way they structure learning activities, the language that is used to describe learning and the way that all members of this community show an eagerness to learn and grow in maturity and understanding.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Guy Claxton, *What's the Point of School: Rediscovering the Heart of Education*, Oneworld Publications, 2008.
- 2 Y Engeström, (1987). *Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research*. Helsinki: Orienta-Konsultit.
- 3 Ritchhart, Church and Morrison, *Making Thinking Visible: How to Promote Engagement, Understanding, and Independence for All Learners*, Jossey-Bass, 2011.
- 4 <http://www.intel.com.au/content/dam/www/program/education/us/en/documents/project-design/skills/habits-of-mind.pdf>, Costa and Kallick, 2002, p. 21, Partnership for 21st century Skills.
- 5 An expression used by former Bishop of Durham NT Wright in *Virtue Reborn, SPCK*. Also *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, HarperOne North America, 2010.

- 6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYRhoWtoiM>.
- 7 Claxton et al., *ibid*, 2010, p.14.
- 8 Claxton et al., *ibid*, 2011, p.45.
- 9 Wright, 2010, *ibid*, Chapter 2, section 3.
- 10 Ken Robinson and Lou Aronica, Viking, 2009.
- 11 Christopher Peterson & Martin EP Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, Volume 1, American Psychological Association, 2004.
- 12 Wright, *ibid*.
- 13 Bakhtin, MM (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin and London: University of Texas Press.
- 14 Claxton et al., *ibid*, 2013.