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Reflecting on Character through Literary Themes

PETER SMAGORINSKY

Uhese are difficult times to be a kid. David Berliner and Bruce Biddle report that high school prostitution has risen by over 260 percent; minors account for nearly half of all criminal acts; over half of all murders are the work of unemployed teens; 10 percent of middle schools employ security guards at their graduations; and bullying, suicide, delinquency, violence, and school dropouts are reaching critical proportions. And that's just in Japan. ■ In the US there is evidence of similar problems among the nation's youth, with schoolhouse murders receiving much media coverage and surveys of teens revealing that

cheating, lying, stealing, alcohol use, and violence are commonplace occurrences. Parents and educators have become alarmed by these trends and, as is often the case, have proposed changes in the school curriculum as a way to address them. One curricular solution has been what is known as *character education*. Many believe that educating students with attention to character development can instill values that contribute to safe, stable, secure communities.

Georgia is one state in which character education has become a concern of the state Department of Education. The effort in Georgia is perhaps typical of other national efforts. It came about following a series of violent assaults in schools and the increasing frequency of teen crime in the Atlanta metropolitan area, including its affluent suburbs. It also followed from a general belief that students were increasingly unruly, dishonest, and disrespectful toward one another and adults.

To remedy the problem, the state legislature passed a bill identifying twenty-seven character traits and required the Department of Education to develop a "character curriculum" around them. These values fall under three headings: citizenship, respect for others, and respect for self. The particular character traits are, for the most part, familiar to parents and Boy Scouts everywhere: hon-

esty, kindness, courtesy, cheerfulness, and so on. Some promote nationalism (e.g., patriotism) and a few (punctuality, school pride) appear to have made the list in order to keep the school engine purring smoothly rather than to improve the national character. English and social studies are emphasized as having particular potential for the consideration of the virtues that make up strong character because they involve the study of the human themes that provide the basis for the development of value systems.

A Thematic Approach to Teaching Literature

As an English teacher, I have always found it impossible to discuss literature with students without considering values, and so I find that the basic assumptions behind the Georgia character curriculum make a great deal of sense. How such a curriculum gets implemented, however, is less clear. I propose a consideration of the merits of implementing a character curriculum through teaching literature according to themes. This is hardly a new proposal—thematic approaches to literary study have been around for a long time. It's how I learned to teach in the 1970s, and the idea was not new then. My proposal could easily be construed as old wine in

a new bottle. So, however, are wine coolers, and they've done quite well. If I may extend the metaphor, I hope that I can add a bit of spritzer to the wine to give it more zest and bring it to a new set of consumers.

One way to incorporate character education into the literature curriculum is with thematic units serving as the vehicles for consideration of questions of character. Thematic approaches to teaching literature enable teachers to focus attention on the key human issues at the center of the literature, to use a variety of genres within the same unit (including genres overlooked by anthologies, such as contemporary music and film), and to sequence literature so that students begin with more accessible material and move toward more difficult works. Literary themes can then form the basis for some version of character education.

A Reflective Character Curriculum

I say “some version of” because I think that character education can be either *didactic* or *reflective*. William J. Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, for instance, is designed to provide exemplary characters whose ethical behavior can serve as the model for youth to follow, likely in accordance with the sort of objective criteria for virtue discussed previously. Using a text such as this in order to promote those virtues is what I would call a didactic approach. While I agree with Bennett that character traits such as compassion, courage, honesty, faith, and so on are indeed virtues, and that we'd be better off if more people practiced them, I am enough of a relativist to wonder if notions of morality might require flexibility at times.

My grandparents, for instance, fled the Soviet Union in the early 1900s to escape the ethnic cleansing carried out through pogroms. I imagine that they told a lie or two and perhaps used forged credentials to make their escape. To me they are heroic people, yet they might not live up to the rules and precepts regarding honesty that are characteristic of a didactic approach to ethical development. If they had accepted an inflexible set of character traits in which honesty is the only policy, they would undoubtedly have been murdered during the anti-Semitic genocide of the time, and I wouldn't be here today to write this article.

The Georgia initiative, at least as described in the “Values and Character Education Implementation Guide” issued by the state, would appear to il-

lustrate a didactic approach. The pamphlet defines character education as “the process by which positive personality traits are developed, encouraged and reinforced through example, study (history and biography of the great and good) and practice (emulation of what has been observed and learned).” The approach is thus what Philip Jackson has called a “mimetic” approach—that is, the student's role is to mimic the exemplary. The adults, according to this perspective, determine what is good and present it to the students as something to gravitate toward.

I prefer instead a reflective approach whereby students consider situations and moral codes and are called on to develop and live by standards that they generate through careful and considerate contemplation of problematic situations. In the English curriculum these situations can be organized according to themes, including, no doubt, those that Bennett features in his *Book of Virtues*. They are offered, however, as cases for reflection on what moral action is.

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While the particular activities and assessments of reflective approaches might vary, what they share is a focus on a more constructivist approach to developing a code of ethics. In most cases I would imagine that students would settle on the same codes of behavior impressed on them through didactic approaches. In a reflective approach, however, the process of instruction would emphasize the students' engagement with the issues and the resolutions they come up with for considering moral dilemmas.

The assumption here is that they will more likely abide by rules that they develop themselves than rules that others try to instill in them. Furthermore, a reflective approach is more responsive to complex moral situations. To return to the case of my grandparents, in resisting and escaping from government-supported death squads, they exhibited the courage that often appears on lists of desirable character traits. Yet they were also unpatriotic toward their government, disloyal to government officials and policies, and I imagine discourteous and unkind toward their oppressors and downright uncheerful much of the time.

A complex situation such as this requires a consideration of character that is not available through the emulation of the great and good. Rather, a definition of morality is required that takes conditions into account and requires extensive reflection on which traits are called for, possibly at the expense of others. Let's consider the example of the Underground Railroad, which is now heralded in most history textbooks as a courageous act of resistance. Like my grandparents, however, the runaway slaves were disloyal to law, disrespectful toward authority figures, and deceptive in their efforts to conceal the truth. Their actions illustrate how any consideration of the quality of a person's character needs to take into account the circumstances that surround his or her decisions.

Before departing this section I would like to stress two points. The first is that many of the most ardent proponents of character education would disagree strongly with my constructivist, reflective view. Undoubtedly they would dismiss this approach as relativistic and possibly anarchic, given the possibility that youngsters might construct a code of ethics that departs in some ways from those adhered to by parents and fundamental to practices of faith. My goal is not to dismiss these views, but to provide an alternative conception of character education that might be more consistent with Deweyan views of how people learn and, therefore, more adaptable to teachers who profess a constructivist, progressive approach to teaching.

I should also state that I think that Bennett's *Book of Virtues* is a good book. My ten-year-old son includes it among his most cherished possessions, and I often find him curled up with it in his beanbag chair. My concerns about Bennett's collection do not question the value of the stories or the traits they endeavor to instill. What I question is whether

reading them will impress the traits upon the reader and whether straightforward stories with clear morals will prepare students for the complexity of the moral situations they face in today's world.

Theory in Practice: A Unit on Success

Of course, talking about how things ought to be is much easier than going out and making changes. I will next illustrate how I think a reflective character education curriculum might look in practice, using examples from my teaching in Illinois high schools. When I taught American literature to juniors, I tried to organize the literature into recurring themes: the literature of protest, the American dream, success, self-reliance, progress, justice, and so on. Although I did not consciously develop a character curriculum, I was always interested in having students think about the themes in terms of their own developing sense of morality and code of conduct. I also taught somewhat differently from year to year, so I changed themes, changed texts within themes, changed activities, changed roles and relationships, and so on each year.

One theme I taught several times was the theme of *success*, in part because it was a topic of great interest to my students—whether we studied it or not—throughout my teaching. The notion of success is also a focus of much American literature, perhaps because the American dream has been central to the nation's consciousness since the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. Because students' notions of success were often tied up with money, glamour, and the material benefits they afford, it seemed a good idea to explore how basing a conception of success solely on fame and fortune overlooked both the negative consequences of such gloried lives and the possibilities for success to come through other types of achievement. I was always able to find literature within the curriculum that served as effective vehicles for helping students engage in that exploration.

Over the years I used a variety of texts, usually incorporating works of different genres. The following list includes both books that I've used and books recommended by my friends Bill Connolly and Tom McCann. The range of works allows for considerable flexibility in teaching a unit like this, including both canonical texts and less familiar works. One pitfall I tried to avoid was selecting texts in which the entrepreneurial spirit is consistently

cast in a negative light, an easy temptation given the way in which big business is often depicted as the breeding ground for greed and avarice. I always felt that the unit was more effective if I avoided oversimplification in both exemplars of success and caricatures of evil. Here, then, are some works of literature and film that could serve as vehicles to help students consider what it means to be a success:

Poetry: W. H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen," Victor Conoski's "Money," Emily Dickinson's "Success Is Counted Sweetest," Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory," Charles Shagoury's "Schizophrenia on Madison Avenue," Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias"

Short Story: Willa Cather's "The Sculptor's Funeral," Ernest Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Frances McComber," James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"

Novel: Horatio Alger's *Struggling Upward, or, Luke Larkin's Luck*; Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*; Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*; F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; Aimee E. Liu's *Face (Face)*; James V. Marshall's *Walkabout*; Ann Lane Petry's *The Street*; H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *The Time Machine*; Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Tom Wolf's *Bonfire of the Vanities*

Play: Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Rod Serling's *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

Film: *Clockers*, *Forrest Gump*, *Good Will Hunting*, *His Girl Friday*, *Hollywood Shuffle*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *La Bamba*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Primary Colors*, *You Can't Take It with You*

Essay: Ralph Waldo Emerson's "The Conduct of Life"

Song: Garth Brooks's "Against the Grain," Madonna's "Material Girl," Frank Sinatra's "My Way"

Given my goal of having students determine for themselves what it means to be a success, I would set as a major goal the writing of an extended definition of the term "success." (For now I'll avoid the debate of whether teachers or students should choose students' writing topics and proceed on the

assumption that there is some merit in having a class of students share common texts, topics, and projects if they are to act as a learning community.) I'll not describe my procedures for teaching extended definition writing, which would take too long for this article, but instead refer readers to various sources on which I based my instruction. (See Hillocks, McCabe, and McCampbell, as well as Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter.) Extended definitions of this sort require students to (1) generate a set of criteria that state the principles behind the concept, and (2) illustrate each criterion with examples that meet it and contrasting examples that appear to meet it yet lack some fundamental element. In order to write such definitions effectively, students needed to consider a range of examples of success. Many of these would be provided by the literature. In addition, examples could come from students' own knowledge of and experience in the world, as well as their independent reading and knowledge of popular culture, including song, film, and television.

Indeed, students' own beliefs about success provided the starting point for our discussions about the topic. One way a teacher could help students draw on their own knowledge would be to write a set of scenarios illustrating problematic instances of success. (See Kahn, Walter and Johannessen, Smagorinsky and Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern.) Students would then make judgments about the characters in the scenarios, perhaps ranking them according to their relative degrees of success. In doing so the students would be considering the concept on their own terms and forming cognitive maps, or scripts, for guiding their subsequent reading.

A related approach would be to begin the discussion of success by considering a series of examples from popular culture, featuring people who are successful in one area of life (e.g., wealth, fame, power), yet whose problems in other areas might qualify their more visible and glamorous achievements. These examples could include accomplished entertainers who have problems with substance abuse, wealthy tycoons whose business tactics are ruthless, professional athletes who are poor role models, politicians who have extramarital affairs, and so on. Similarly, students could think of people they know—parents, community members, teachers, coaches—who lack wealth and fame yet are successful according to other considerations. The

ultimate goal of this discussion would be to form the rudiments of an extended definition of success that students would refine and illustrate as the unit progressed. I usually move students into small groups for the generation of definitional criteria so that each student has an opportunity to participate in this part of the process. Students can then collaborate on generating the criteria and also have the latitude to revise them as their own conceptions of success develop through the course of the unit.

An initial discussion of this sort can help students consider issues of character in ways that are highly meaningful to them. If, for instance, they feel that a wealthy, famous professional athlete is not a success because he is conceited, self-centered, arrogant, and involved in multiple paternity suits, then they have helped to identify issues of character that they feel are important. The point is not to coerce students into finding money to be a source of corruption, but rather to have them think carefully about whether money in and of itself is a mark of success. Among the examples they consider should be people with wealth and fame and also humility, grace, compassion, and generosity—for instance, those who use their time, money, and influence to establish foundations that support community projects, raise scholarship money, fund medical research, support civic and humanitarian initiatives, and so on. The question that always emerges from these considerations is this: Of all these attributes, which are those that allow one to be considered a success? By delineating what counts as good character and contrasting it with what only appears to be good character, students are coming closer to developing an ethical code that they can live by.

The reading and discussion of the unit texts should help students refine the criteria they develop through this introductory activity. Other activities in the unit could help students come to an understanding of what they value in others and themselves. One activity that I found myself repeating, no matter how often I revised my lessons, was the development of a set of matrixes for thinking about the characters in *Death of a Salesman*. In small groups, students would rank the characters according to two scales: from most to least materialistic and from most to least respected. Although the rankings would vary somewhat, they were also remarkably stable and followed a pattern that students found surprising and unsettling: The characters that they consistently found the most materialistic (Ben,

Hap, Willie) were the characters that they respected the least, and the characters that they found the least materialistic (Linda, Bernard, Biff) were the ones they respected the most. This realization came about only in the whole-class discussion in which each group shared their rankings and placed them on an aggregated matrix on the chalkboard. Their recognition of this conflict often resulted in a reexamination of their own values, since most students initially were not troubled by their own materialism. After this activity, however, they had to reassess their values because they realized that, in being materialistic, they were acting in ways they themselves did not respect.

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I should add that this clarification did not cause students to completely abandon any sense of materialism. In fact, they helped me see possible benefits of desiring some degree of wealth. A number of students argued that having the goal of wealth helped them to develop other virtues through which they would achieve it: a work ethic, self-discipline, responsibility, and so on. Just as they were beginning to develop a more sophisticated understanding of what success entails, so was I. In each case, the realizations came about through reflection on why we believed as we did, reflections that often resulted in changes in those beliefs. I am skeptical that such changes would have occurred if I had instead taken a didactic approach and told students that they needed to be more disciplined and responsible. By coming to that understanding themselves through their own consideration of what they valued, they adopted the beliefs with a certain passion and commitment to live better lives.

Often mandated changes in curriculum require teachers to set aside additional time to do something that they would not ordinarily do, and the result is yet more fragmentation in the curriculum and less time for students to learn from their engagement with literature. While undoubtedly the character education movement could have that effect, I also think that it can be incorporated into the instruction that is already taking place in ways that make literary engagement more enriching and meaningful to students. The approach I have described fits well with constructivist approaches to teaching in which students' knowledge comes through their own activity and is implicated in their development of concepts. I have argued that this approach will contribute more to students' character development than didactic approaches, which fit with authoritative, mimetic approaches to schooling in which students are expected to master material provided by teachers and texts. I believe that mastery, as conceived here, is only apparent—that is, students can memorize lists of virtues and pass tests on them but will not necessarily adopt them. I am much more confident that a reflective approach to character education is more likely to help students develop virtues that they believe in their bones and then to live by them.

Note: Special thanks to Joel Taxel for his response to an earlier draft of this essay.

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Best Practices in Composition: Call for Submissions

Submissions are invited for *Best Practices in Composition*, a collection of approaches, assignments, and activities, edited by Cindy Moore and Peggy O'Neill. We imagine a collection that offers descriptions of methods used in composition (or writing-intensive) courses, as well as information about the particular contexts and theories that inform them. Possible categories include overall course design, individual and collaborative writing assignments, pre-writing, arrangement, grammar and usage, style, document design, response, assessment, critical reading, small-group and whole-class workshops, and conferencing. Though all writing teachers will find such a collection useful, we are especially interested in helping new teachers appreciate the range of current practices and how those practices reflect both institutional and disciplinary concerns. If interested, please submit two copies of the following **by July 1, 2000**: 1) a brief description of your particular teaching context, including classification (e.g., 2-year college, university, high school, literacy center), location, size, student profile; 2) a 2–3 page description of your approach, assignment, or activity; 3) a brief theoretical rationale (i.e., Why do you do what you do? How does your practice reflect current thinking about language, knowledge, learning?). Send submissions to Cindy Moore, Department of English and Linguistics, Indiana University-Purdue University, Fort Wayne, IN 46805. (E-mail submissions should be sent to moorec@ipfw.edu.) Send inquiries to Peggy O'Neill at poneill@gasou.edu.