



## CLASSROOM PRACTICE

# How to Integrate Character Education Into the Curriculum

**Having become convinced that all teachers need to be actively involved in raising their students' moral awareness, Ms. Gilness devised a formula that enables her to weave character education seamlessly — and painlessly — into her content lessons.**

BY JANE GILNESS

To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.

— *Theodore Roosevelt*

**A**S A TEACHER of language arts, I never fail to be astonished by the rhetorical impact of a well-worded quote. I collect and savor those that strike me. I indulge in philosophical wallowing. A pithy quote speaks volumes. When I first read the quote by Roosevelt, I was overwhelmed with the sense of my responsibility as a teacher. I had always felt fairly confident in my ability to impart content, but this was an added obligation I could not ignore. I grappled with the following question: How can I use my position as an instructor to imbue my students with a strong sense of moral awareness and still commit to the job of teaching content at the same time?

Character education has become

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a primary concern of mine, and I have searched the Web, pored over many a curious volume, and come to the conclusion that character education cannot be isolated, codified, and packaged into tidy little instructional units in a how-to manual. Assessments of character can't be conjured up with checklists, rubrics, and clearly defined results. That would be too easy.

As I pursued my research, I kept running into complex philosophical constructs that finally led me to circle back on a few homely truths. From these I put together what I have come to call the "character cocktail," a full-bodied and harmonious blend of community, manners, and ethical decision making.

### COMMUNITY

"The best and the deepest moral training is that which one gets by having to enter into proper relations with others," wrote John Dewey. "Present educational systems, so far as they destroy or neglect this unity, render it difficult or impossible to get any regular, moral training." Another truth.

The first truth I discovered in the classroom is that a teacher cannot begin to think about fostering character without first creating a positive classroom climate replete with a strong sense of community and proper relations among members. Could I integrate this concept into my instructional strategies? It would surely be difficult, but it seemed well worth the effort. I decided to rely on one of my finer qualities: unabashed deviousness. If kids think you're too obvious, they'll think you're preachy.

One method I found of integrating the concept of community into my Honors English 10 classroom was through the use of eulogies. I told the students that we were studying prefixes and roots. As an example, I asked them what a eulogy was. They all knew and were quick to tell me that everyone knows eulogies are given at funerals. Nice words and kind thoughts about dead people are delivered to the mourners. I then instructed them to look up the prefix (*eu*) and the root (*logy*). I asked them to define them, and they came to the conclusion that "eulogy" simply means to "speak well."

Once they had thought about the word, I asked them why we wait un-

til our loved ones can no longer hear us before we say something nice about them. Because I was new to the district, I told the students that, while I didn't know them, they knew one another very well. I asked them to give eulogies for one another so I could get a sense of who they were. They loved the idea. I allowed them to set the criteria for delivering a eulogy, but I was quick to point out that students who were uncomfortable with being in the limelight would not be required to participate. Being genuinely ghoulish creatures, they insisted on playing the role of the dearly departed, selecting background music, and so on. I was surprised by how much thought and planning some of them put into sharing their thoughts about their classmates. We had a few happy tears and much laughter. The result? A stronger sense of community and camaraderie. (They thought it was a vocabulary lesson and ice-breaking activity).

I've also found that giving students ownership of the curriculum promotes a positive classroom climate and gives them a sense of being a vital part of a community. When students write something that I feel has instructional value, for example, I request their permission to make an overhead of it for use as a teaching tool. I am always quick to acknowledge when student ideas or strategies are better than mine, and I thank them for, in effect, helping me do a better job. They are genuinely flattered. In fact, they become so empowered that I continue to squeeze high-quality work out of them because they know that there's always a chance that they will be immortalized in an overhead. The idea that they are respected by an instructor as valuable classroom assets certainly promotes a sense of social responsibility.

Last — but certainly not least —

among my efforts to build community is my use of classroom rituals. Such rituals can give students a real sense of belonging. I always keep a stash of penny candy on hand. If I call someone by a wrong name, I give him or her candy as a form of apology for my rudeness. It gives me the opportunity to show students, not just talk to them about, the value of making others feel important and respected. I also give students candy if they catch me making an error in grammar or usage. Usually I make these errors on purpose, but the students don't always know that, and they do pay close attention. And if they're attentive, they're learning. Granted, their motive may be to pounce on my mistakes, to show me up, and to mooch some candy. But inadvertently they are learning because they have to hang on my every word. Simply having such rituals promotes a sense of community, but it is also possible to integrate them into instructional strategies.

## MANNERS

John Fletcher Moulton refers to “the domain of obedience to the unenforceable. That obedience is the obedience of a man to that which he cannot be forced to obey. He is the enforcer of the law upon himself.” During many hours of research on citizenship, civility, and democratic thinking, I kept underlining similar ideas. Thus I discovered what I consider to be the second ingredient in my character cocktail: “the domain of obedience to the unenforceable.” Simply put, it means “doing the right thing” even when no one is looking or imposing a law that forces you to do it. It's the stuff of daily life — basic humanity and decency. In a word, it's manners.

I make the distinction between etiquette and manners here. For ex-

ample, knowing which fork to use is a matter of etiquette, which does not have any inherent moral value. On the other hand, the essence of good manners does have a distinctly moral base. It has to do with the most fundamental premises — making sure one never intentionally makes someone else uncomfortable and avoiding saying or doing anything that diminishes another person's sense of dignity or self-worth.

It is absolutely essential for educators to subtly thread such a conception of manners into the tapestry of our daily classroom life. In order to do this, I decided to ratchet up my efforts to be a good example and role model. Because you get what you give, I treat students with the same respect I would another adult. If I make a mistake, I admit it, I apologize, and I move on. The students mimic what they observe. I act like a hostess who tries to make her guests as comfortable as possible, and eventually they respond graciously. I keep reminding them that, while my classroom is a dictatorship, it's a benevolent one. Again, I show them how manners work by trying to be mannerly myself.

Once the students have a clear feel for the kind of classroom courtesies that I extend to and expect from them, I simply teach them manners and the fundamentals of etiquette. Or rather, I have them teach one another. I found a wonderful book on manners for teens by Alex Packer. It's titled *How Rude!* Packer's book is delightful and immensely appealing to teens. I integrate a manners unit into my interpersonal skills curriculum by having students do group presentations. Each group selects a section of Packer's book to work into a presentation that includes visual aids, graphics, audience interaction, role playing, and skits. We cover topics that range from

introductions to telephone and cell phone manners.

The students thoroughly enjoy the unit, especially when they are allowed to demonstrate the dos and don'ts of civilized conduct. Indeed, they are particularly adept at demonstrating *uncivilized* conduct (their area of expertise). When we are finished, I have them write group analysis papers. No time is wasted, and the teaching and learning of manners is fully integrated into the curriculum.

### ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

"The good of a nation," A. K. Benjamin states, "demands the consideration of serious ethical questions. If education ignores the value and moral aspect of the human psyche, where will society find citizens able to make moral decisions?" Benjamin's words inspired me to find a way to stir the final ingredient into the character cocktail: ethical decision making. Of course, my motive here isn't entirely noble. Who will some day pick up the torch and make decisions that will affect us as we slide into senescence? Do we want our future leaders to have acquired their decision-making skills in an ethical vacuum? I think not. I recognized a clear need to help my students acquire a set of universal values that will enable them to make ethical decisions.


My job as a language arts instructor lends itself particularly well to this task, but it requires a formidable amount of work. All good literature explores universal themes that involve such ethical dilemmas as truth versus loyalty, the individual versus communi-

ty, short-term versus long-term, and justice versus mercy. Such conflicts are complex, and it would be much easier to simply assign readings and conduct follow-up assessments that include trivial reading checks and objective questions. However, unless we help students develop critical thinking skills and see connections to other contexts, they will merely be skimming the surface of a story. So I ditched my tests in favor of reading literature aloud to my students and following up with Socratic dialogues and fishbowl debates. I have my students write in reflection journals. After all, how could I, in good conscience, teach *A Separate Peace* without asking them to record their feelings about jealousy, friendship, loyalty, and betrayal? I would certainly not be doing justice to *Antigone* without connecting the theme of anarchy versus social order to its modern applications. How could I not discuss the concept of the Golden Mean as it relates to the tragic flaw of a Greek hero? All of these ideas are presented, discussed, and written about in journals. When my students write reflections that show some depth and substance, I write back to them in their journals.

The more I write in their journals, the more thought students put into their writing in an effort to evoke a personal response from me. Yes, it's work for me, but it's well worth it.

I also make use of some warm-up activities that stimulate critical thinking and allow students to practice decision-making skills. I use dilemma cards from a Milton Bradley game called *A Question of Scruples* (available in both adult and kid editions). Each card contains an ethical dilemma. Instead of allowing my students to answer the questions with a mere yes, no, or it depends, I have them walk through the reasoning behind their decisions. In a whole-class activity, we discuss unknown factors that might affect our decisions. We also focus on how decisions will affect other people. They enjoy the game, and it forces them to think about making decisions on the basis of universally held values.

For my Honors English 10 class, I stumbled on some examples of real-life dilemmas in *How Good People Make Tough Choices*, by Rushworth Kidder. I use the situations described in this book in conjunction with thematic exercises that relate to similar conflicts found in fiction. These dilemmas provide excellent closing activities for literature units.

My quest to integrate character education into my teaching is far from over. I have learned that we can't isolate character education as a separate discipline. My content lessons will continue to be laced with community, manners, and ethical decision making, the ingredients of my "character cocktail." Bottoms up! 

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