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Ethical Education through Service Learning

By David B. Wangaard, Ed.D.

A variety of strategies can be called upon to foster ethical education in the classroom. Ethical dilemmas, Socratic dialogues regarding current events, and reflective discussions about literature all provide opportunities for students to practice ethical reasoning. While these strategies support the development of those cognitive skills involved in ethical reasoning, service learning can engage two additional domains—the affective and the behavioral—and thus offer powerful opportunities for meaningful ethical education.

The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (NSLC) cites eight standards for effective service learning (see http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/standards). I would like to highlight three of those standards here, as they specifically support ethical education. These standards make a clear distinction of practice as compared with traditional adult-led community service.

The project should be explicitly linked to the curriculum

One NSLC standard for effective service learning requires the project to be explicitly linked to learning objectives within the curriculum. It is the responsibility of the teacher to maintain this linkage as the teacher and students engage in project selection and planning. Ethical/character formation should be included as an explicit learning objective for every service-learning project. Objective statements can be written with student input to document this goal.

For example, students in an advocacy project seeking to promote academic integrity could write an objective statement as follows: "Project participants will recognize the need and the ethical reasons that all school community members should demonstrate academic integrity." Documenting this objective clarifies the ethical goal and focuses participants on achieving the objective during the

project. Similarly, a language arts objective for this project could be stated as follows: "Project participants will be able to correctly demonstrate citation methods for written, electronic, and oral communication in a bibliography." Teachers and students can work together to identify multiple ethical and curricular objectives as they plan their project.

Students should be engaged in selection, planning, and implementation

A second standard for effective service learning requires the engagement of students in project selection, planning, and implementation. This standard would be embraced by all those familiar with experiential learning. The "value added" in service learning is that the project will include an act of service to people, places, or the environment. Engaging students to identify the service need, the reasons the need exists, and how to go about addressing the need, all provide rich opportunities for students to experience a personal sense of ownership for an issue, which can expand their view of responsibility as citizens in community.

Identifying a service need could be more efficiently accomplished by the teacher alone (sometimes necessary given time demands), but when the teacher can give students project selection options and maintain curricular linkage, student engagement increases along with their willingness to engage in the ethical issues associated with the project.

A service-learning project can be designed as a teacher-student collaboration with the goal of increasing student engagement. Collaboration is not the teacher telling the students the project topic, or leaving the room to see what the students determine as their project interest. A true collaboration of teacher and students includes the teacher

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helping to guide students to identify a service topic that has a clear connection to existing curricular goals and is practical given the time and resources available.

The teacher should also guide students to find research defining the proposed project need and possible solutions. The research step to identify dimensions of the need and solutions can become a project jigsaw, where the teacher helps the students organize themselves in small research teams to find answers to project questions. For example, in an academic-integrity advocacy project, students may ask, "What defines academic integrity and cheating? What percent of students cheat and do we know why? Are there practical steps to promote academic integrity and resist cheating?" As answers to these research questions emerge, the teacher can help students create a synthesis of the responses in a format where the class can study the summary of their work. The results of this research will then support steps of project planning and implementation. On these steps, too, teachers and students should collaborate. The website for The School for Ethical Education (SEE) has an outline of steps for successful service learning (http://www.ethicsed.org/programs/yes/pdf/sl_footprints.pdf).

I have focused on the topic of academic integrity, as SEE has recently published a Toolkit that supports a service-learning project as an adult/student collaboration to promote academic integrity (see http://www.ethicsed.org/programs/integrity-works). The Toolkit includes many ideas successfully implemented by high school service-learning teams that sought to promote academic integrity. Other topics for service-learning projects are only limited by the time and imagination that teachers and students have to reflect on their assets (resources, abilities, curricular interests) and how they might support local or global needs. Service learning can successfully address topics such as direct service to the school or to charities, environmental projects, or advocacy projects for causes that will be of interest to students. (Go to http://www.ethicsed.org/programs/yes/index.htm for descriptions of successful projects.)

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Every project should include reflection

A third standard for effective service learning is most critical to our goal of ethical/character formation: every service-learning project should include participant reflection. For our example advocacy project, the background research may lead to a reflection question such as "Why is cheating so pervasive in high schools?" This question opens up a broad opportunity of ethical discussion and reflection. Do students experience too much pressure to qualify for elite colleges? Is cheating primarily an act of commission to get an advantage over others, or is cheating an act of desperation due to perceived time pressure?

Activities for ethical reflection can be divided into a variety of sub-components, two of which include ethical sensitivity and ethical judgment. Building on James Rest's four-component model of moral functioning, Darcia Narvaez and her colleagues recently published a series of four books (see http://ace.nd.edu/press/nurturing-character-in-the-classroom-series-ethex-books-1-4). Two books of the "Ethex Series" help teachers integrate activities to develop students' ethical sensitivity and ethical judgment within academic curricula. Much of this work can be applied to service learning. Ethical sensitivity is defined by students' ability to recognize when an ethical situation is described in a community need. For example, is academic dishonesty really an ethical problem? Not everyone agrees that cheating in school defines a student-focused ethical issue. One way to define an ethical problem is to evaluate if the issue results in harm or injustice. Evaluating community needs to determine if harm or injustice is evident can create an opportunity to develop ethical sensitivity. For example, one could ask if bullying in school, homelessness, or environmental challenges are ethical issues. Reflection on how any issue affects the welfare of both the individual and society as a whole helps develop ethical sensitivity; ultimately, such reflection supports the individual's choice to demonstrate ethical behavior.

Ethical judgment is reflected in a separate cognitive function defined by students' ability to use the facts available (in an ethical dilemma) and come to a reasonable conclusion that is supported by sound ethical theory. While risking oversimplification here, a person practicing duty-based ethical theory could reflect on the significance of cheating in light

of recognized rules for academic integrity. A person practicing utilitarian ethics might evaluate student cheating as to the consequences cheating has on the student and school. A third ethical theory, the virtue-based model, is practiced when a person chooses to demonstrate positive character as an outcome of any dilemma. All three perspectives can be synthesized in student reflection regarding the ethical impact of cheating in school. Students should be taught how to use ethical reflection to evaluate a variety of issues or potential project needs *(The Golden Compass* is a workbook to practice ethical decision making in grades 5-12: http://www.ethicsed.org/consulting/golden-compass.htm). Identified project needs provide useful issues for ethical evaluation as they relate to the harm that might be caused to individuals, the school, society or the environment. While experts debate the power of ethical judgment as a factor leading to ethical behavior, many studies note a positive correlation. Our goal should be to recognize that ethical judgment and ethical sensitivity can be practiced during service learning as skills in support of ethical behavior.

Ethical reflection can also be catalyzed by using questions that spring up from considering how the service-learning participants interact with each other and those they may be serving. How are we doing as a class? Are we respecting the people we serve? These simple questions can lead to a profound ethical analysis of how students are personally and collectively treating one another and their community. Formative reflection on project outcomes has great potential to guide the project successfully in both ethical and performance goals.

Additional NSLC standards for effective service learning include these five: (1) the project is meaningful, (2) the project welcomes diversity of participation, (3) the project seeks partnerships with others in the community, (4) the project includes planned evaluation, and (5) the project has sufficient time and duration. All eight NSLC standards are important to effective implementation of service learning, while the three standards addressed above are highlighted as a means to focus teachers on the opportunities for ethical education.

Project connection to curricular objectives, student engagement in all aspects of the project, and ethical reflection all support opportunities to educate three learning domains recognized by character educators. These three domains already mentioned include (1) the students' cognitive process (head) during project planning, implementation, and ethical reflection, (2) the students' affective domain (heart) where student engagement is valued as they are given the opportunity to have voice and choice regarding project planning and implementation, and (3) the students' behavioral domain (hand) where the project creates opportunity for student action to demonstrate positive character to peers and to recipients of project work.

Well-designed service learning engages students' heads, hearts, and hands in a rich experience catalyzed by the recognition that they are serving something bigger than themselves. We understand through student testimony that service helps create a powerful affective link that encourages students to participate in authentic ethical reflection during project work. These reflection opportunities make service learning an excellent ethical-education strategy.

Why is service learning not practiced more widely? It is clear the standards to effectively implement service learning demand more time and effort for thoughtful planning and implementation than traditional classroom or community-service activities. However, the evidence shows that the extra work required is rewarded with many benefits, including positive academic achievement, positive development of character and social skills, and positive class climate (see http://www.ethicsed.org/programs/yes/sl_research.htm). ●

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Creating a Culture of Academic Integrity:
A Toolkit for Secondary Schools
by David B. Wangaard, Ed.D., and Jason M. Stephens, Ph.D.
CSEE members: $35 Others: $45

Creating a Culture of Academic Integrity is a combination "how-to," activities, and resource book to help schools move through the process of creating a school culture that fosters integrity. It was written by a former high school principal (see this issue's lead article) who has spent the last decade as a leader in the field of ethical education, in collaboration with a professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Connecticut. (The February issue of *Connections* included an article by Wangaard and Stephens.)

The first several pages of *Creating a Culture of Academic Integrity* offer suggestions for establishing an Academic Integrity Committee in a school, and for composing an honor code. The remainder of the book—in two separate sections—takes square aim at what the title of the book suggests: that academic integrity does not come from either the code or the council, but rather from the work done to create a culture where academic integrity is both the expectation and the norm (section 3) and that part of creating a culture entails integrating concepts of integrity into the curricular and extracurricular life of the school.

Creating a Culture of Academic Integrity includes a compact disk, for easier access to copies of the book's handouts. ●

Literature in Review

but doesn't allow the good-news stories to shine disproportionately against the dark background of two millennia.

A Convenient Hatred depends heavily on primary-source testimony from victims, witnesses, persecutors, and upstanders in every era, including the prescient testimony of President (then General) Eisenhower upon visiting one of the death camps: "I visited every nook and cranny of the camp because I felt it my duty to be in a position from then on to testify at first hand about these things in case there ever grew up at home the belief or the assumption that the 'stories of Nazi brutality were just propaganda.'"

In George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra,* the tutor Theodotus begs Caesar to save the burning Library of Alexandria: "What is burning there is the memory of mankind." Caesar replies, "A shameful memory. Let it burn." Caesar is wrong, of course: the shameful, along with the laudable, memories should be illuminated, not burned. Antisemitism is one of the longest and most shameful chapters in human memory; *A Convenient Hatred* helps ensure that its history, and the determination to oppose it, will not be buried under the ashes of forgetfulness. ●

After 40 years in independent education, Richard Barbieri is currently devoting his energies to a variety of writing and editing projects, including blogging on books and society at readerweeper.blogspot.com. He can be reached at richarde.barbieri@gmail.com.