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## Intellectual Virtues and Educational Practice

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## **Intellectual Virtues and Educational Practice**

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One prominent approach to “virtue epistemology” examines the nature and epistemic significance of intellectual virtues such as curiosity, open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual courage. Intellectual virtues so conceived are the character traits of a good thinker, learner, or inquirer.

Intellectual virtues are also related to but distinct from natural cognitive ability. A person can be extremely intellectually “gifted” while also being intellectually arrogant, careless, or lazy. Conversely, a person of mediocre natural intelligence can be highly curious, open, careful, and thorough in her thinking. Again, intellectual virtues are the strengths of *character* needed for the competent and successful pursuit of “epistemic goods” like knowledge and understanding (Baehr 2011: Ch. 2).

### **Intellectual Virtues as an Educational Aim**

Intellectual virtue concepts are useful for fleshing out a plausible but elusive “third aim” of education. To be sure, a good education will equip students with a broad base of knowledge and a wide range of cognitive skills, from reading to writing to basic arithmetic. But it will also do more than this. As one often hears, education at its best also inspires a “love of learning” or shapes students into “lifelong learners” or “critical thinkers.” Such claims are of a piece and intuitively appealing. They suggest an important educational aim that is at once epistemic and personal. However, the concepts they invoke tend to be vague or slippery. The language and concepts of intellectual virtue offer a richer, more concrete, and compelling way of capturing this aim (Baehr 2013, 249-250).

To illustrate, consider the notion of “lifelong learning.” Plausibly, a “lifelong learner” is someone who pursues new topics and questions, makes time to feed her mind, thinks deeply and carefully about what she is learning, has a good sense of what she doesn’t know or understand, is open to new ways of thinking, and so on. This is another way of saying that she possesses intellectual virtues like inquisitiveness and intellectual tenacity, carefulness, thoroughness, humility, and open-mindedness. Or consider the notion of “critical thinking.” Critical thinking is partly a matter of being *able* to reason well. However, a person can have this ability while lacking either an appropriate sense of when it should be used or the motivation to use it. Such persons fall short of being “critical thinkers” in the relevant, normatively robust sense. To be a critical thinker in this sense, a person must also, as Harvey Siegel has put it, possess a “critical spirit” marked by qualities such as “intellectual honesty, justice to evidence, sympathetic and impartial consideration of interests, objectivity, and impartiality” (1988, 39). These qualities also are plausibly understood as intellectual virtues. Because intellectual virtues have both a “judgment component” and a “motivational component,” they secure the kind of rational

excellence lacked by the person who possesses the ability to reason well but is disposed to use this ability foolishly or not at all (Baehr, forthcoming).

Virtue epistemologists have given extensive, psychologically rich, and philosophically sophisticated accounts of intellectual virtues like open-mindedness, curiosity, intellectual courage, intellectual humility, and intellectual perseverance (see e.g. Riggs 2016; Whitcomb 2010; Baehr 2011, Chs. 8 and 9; Whitcomb et al 2015; Roberts and Wood 2007, Chs. 8 and 9; and King 2014). Given the connection just noted between these virtues and the relevant personal-cum-epistemic educational aim, virtue epistemology contains resources for better articulating and explaining what this aim amounts to. Moreover, the resulting characterization is personally compelling and attractive. Part of what it is to be a “good person” or to be good *qua* person is to possess qualities like inquisitiveness, open-mindedness, attentiveness, intellectual humility, and intellectual courage (Baehr 2011, Ch. 6). We desire these qualities in our colleagues, friends, and spouses. And we seek to impart them to our children and students. This is significant vis-à-vis education, for teachers and students alike are more apt to enthusiastically pursue goals like “critical thinking” or “lifelong learning” to the extent that they constitute the kind of concrete and personally compelling terms afforded by a virtue epistemological framework (Baehr 2013, 253-255).

### **Implications for Educational Practice**

Given that growth in intellectual virtues is a worthy educational aim, it is important to consider the implications of this point for educational practice. What difference, if any, should it make to how practitioners approach their work with students? The remainder of this entry outlines several principles drawn from philosophy, psychology, and educational theory that together comprise an initial response to this question (for more on this topic, see Baehr 2016, especially Chs. 10-14; Battaly 2006).

#### *Engaging Agency*

One overriding implication is that education should be conducted in ways that systematically engage the *agency* of students. It should not be geared toward the passive absorption of information or the rote memorization of facts and formulas. This is a consequence of what intellectual virtues are and how they are formed.

Intellectual virtues are dispositions of thought and (intellectual) action: they involve observing, wondering, listening, contemplating, judging, doubting, affirming, and much more. As such, an exercise of intellectual virtues engages the rational and volitional capacities of their possessor in a deep and systematic way (Baehr 2011, Ch. 2). Further, as Aristotle noted long ago (e.g. in Books II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*), character virtues arise (in part) through the repeated *practice* of activities characteristic of the virtue or virtues in question. While Aristotle’s point was about moral and civic virtues, it applies no less to intellectual virtues conceived of as character traits. A person develops open-mindedness, for instance, in part through repeatedly taking up and giving a fair hearing to perspectives very different from her own (Battaly 2016).

The upshot is that where intellectual virtues are taken seriously as an educational aim, students must be actively engaged in the learning process. In particular, given that intellectual virtues are manifested in and “perfect” the activity of thinking, students must be given frequent and well-supported opportunities to thoughtfully and critically engage with the subject matter. (While this can be accomplished in a variety of ways, Ron Ritchhart’s work on “thinking routines” [2011 2015, Ch. 6, and 2002, 147-160] provides an excellent example of how teachers can incorporate opportunities to practice intellectual virtues across the curriculum.)

### *Self-Reflection*

A student’s progress in intellectual virtues can also be facilitated by her understanding of her own “habits of mind,” that is, her own intellectual character strengths and limitations. Such understanding can help the student identify which areas of her intellectual character might need improvement as well as some steps she might take to bring this improvement about. If conveyed to her teachers, it might also help them to identify interventions with a similar aim and impact.

For these and related reasons, self-reflection is also an integral part of educating for intellectual virtues (Sockett 2012, Ch. 9). Such reflection can incorporate, not only a student’s first-person, introspective reports about her own intellectual character, but also the third-person perspectives of other knowledgeable and trusted parties like the student’s teachers, parents, or friends. This kind of activity this should, of course, be developmentally informed and appropriate. And it should be designed with sensitivity to the sorts of biases and other psychological factors known to limit the reliability of self-reflection. But when opportunities for self-reflection are structured in this way, they can yield a “working model” of a student’s intellectual character that can be utilized by the student and her teachers in the service of her intellectual character development.

### *Attention to Value and Significance*

Educating for intellectual virtues also calls for giving serious consideration to the epistemic motivation of students. Part of the aim of doing so, as suggested above, is to help instill or inspire in students a desire for understanding and an enjoyment of the learning process, both of which are central to the possession of intellectual virtues. Shaping the epistemic motivation of students is, of course, a complex and challenging process. At a minimum, it requires that students regularly perceive the *value* or *significance* of what they are learning.

Many familiar modes of instruction neglect this principle. Students often are asked to master a subject or skill with little or no reflection on the importance or significance of doing so. In cases like this, it should be no surprise when students exhibit lackluster epistemic motivation (Newmann et al 2001). Thus where growth in intellectual virtues is the goal, taking pains to shore up the underlying value and meaning of the curriculum is critical.

This requires, first, that teachers themselves locate and attend to the value of what they are teaching; and, where no such value exists, that they do what they can to alter the curriculum. Importantly, “value” or “meaning” need not be understood in narrowly instrumentalist terms. Teachers needn’t always have an answer to the exasperated student’s question, “When I am ever going to use this in real life?” Rather, a great deal of knowledge and many intellectual skills are

valuable in a richer, broader sense, for example, on account of helping students better understand their place in the universe, shedding light on how the world works, shaping students into more informed and competent citizens, yielding insight into the deeper themes or concerns of the human experience, or otherwise contributing to a richer and more meaningful existence.

However, it is important, not just that the curriculum have significant meaning or value, but also that practitioners call *attention* to this value and give students opportunities to reflect on, explore, and even challenge it (Russell 1926, 154). They must be willing to entertain the question of “Why are we learning this?” and be prepared with an answer that is thoughtful and reasonable. Again, if students fail to see (or feel) any value in what they are being asked to do or learn, their level of epistemic motivation is likely to remain low, and their intellectual character growth limited.

### *A Supportive Environment*

A practitioner’s best efforts at fostering intellectual virtues in her students will be limited in their impact to the extent that these efforts are undertaken in a classroom environment or ethos that is out of alignment with the practitioner’s goal. For, as virtue theorists have long observed, virtues arise most readily in the context of supportive environments and communities that bolster other, more direct efforts at bringing them about (MacIntyre 1981).

Many factors contribute to a classroom climate or ethos. These include the prevailing evaluative language, the core principles that are upheld and practiced, the allotment of “instructional minutes,” classroom rituals and routines, and more. Hence a further implication of treating intellectual virtues as an educational goal is that practitioners must do what they can to create classroom environments that are themselves supportive of intellectual character growth. In such environments, a rich epistemic vocabulary is employed, intellectual growth is regarded as possible, intellectual struggle is valued alongside accuracy and speed, deep understanding of the subject matter is a dominant aim, and there is a well-established expectation that students will actively and rigorously engage with the subject matter (Ritchhart 2002 and 2015). (These works by Ritchhart are an excellent source of concrete examples of how teachers can create classroom “cultures of thinking” that support their students’ growth in intellectual virtues.)

Classroom environments conducive to intellectual character growth also tend to be marked by two *moral* values: namely, respect and care. While epistemically oriented, intellectual character growth remains a profoundly *personal* process. It involves the shaping of students’ fundamental beliefs, attitudes, and feelings about thinking and learning (Baehr 2013, 251-253). Both commonsense and empirical research suggest that such change and transformation does not occur in a relational vacuum, and certainly not in an environment that is relationally hostile. Rather, it requires, at a minimum, that students feel safe and respected (Siegel 2012; Berkowitz and Bier 2005; Lickona 1992). Consequently, teachers interested in educating for intellectual virtues must operate with a high standard of respect, both in how they interact with their students and in how they expect their students to interact with each other. Ideally, however, students would not only feel respected by their teachers, but also positively *cared* for. While this sets a high bar for teachers, there are ways of interacting with students that can foster a caring teacher-student connection that do not demand unreasonable amount of a teacher’s time or other

resources (see, e.g., Porter 2016, 235-237). In any case, it can be expected that a teacher's other efforts at fostering intellectual virtues in her students will be considerably amplified to the extent that these efforts are undertaken within the context of a relationship that is at once respectful and caring.

### *Modeling*

A final pedagogical implication of treating growth in intellectual virtues as an important educational aim is that the traits in question must be modeled for students. Students do not acquire intellectual virtues just by learning *about* them from their teachers. Rather, intellectual virtues, like other kinds of virtues, arise via a complex psychological and sociological process (Kristjánson 2015). Several aspects of this process have already been touched upon. But a further aspect consists of exposure to compelling examples and “exemplars” of intellectual virtues. Such exposure has the potential to facilitate experiences of intellectual *admiration*, which can lead to the *emulation* intellectually virtuous agents, and which in turn can facilitate positive growth in intellectual virtues (Zagzebski 2013).

This can be accomplished by sharing stories or other depictions of intellectually virtuous exemplars from history, literature, film, or contemporary life (Bohlin 2005). Perhaps more importantly, teachers can and should manifest intellectual virtues in their own intellectual activity, for example, by demonstrating wonder and passion for their subject matter (curiosity), being willing to admit when they don't know something (intellectual humility), giving a fair and open hearing to multiple perspectives (open-mindedness), searching for and conveying deep understanding (thoroughness), and so on. As this illustrates, it is important that teachers not “keep their thinking to themselves”—that they “think out loud,” raising the curtain on what intellectual virtues look like in practice (Ritchhart 2002, 210-217, and 2015, Ch. 5).

### **Conclusion**

Intellectual virtues are an important educational aim on par with knowledge and intellectual skills. Several implications of this fact for educational practice have been identified. Two final observations are in order.

First, in many respects, the sorts of pedagogical principles identified here are ones that the best teachers already abide by and exemplify. This is as it should be, for it is widely thought that education at its best fosters qualities like curiosity, open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual courage.

Second, it is important to bear in mind that these principles should be understood and adhered to *as a whole*. If a teacher creates a caring and respectful classroom environment, say, but fails to model virtuous thinking or neglects to give her students frequent opportunities to practice the virtues of good thinking, then she is likely to have a minimal impact on the intellectual character of her students. Thus the principles sketched here point in the direction of a comprehensive educational approach.

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