A Classroom Closer To The Heart
Teaching Virtues Through Literature
Can Transform the Classroom Community

Dave Allan
Chilliwack, British Columbia
Abstract

Some readers may recognize these lyrics—especially if you are a fan of the Canadian rock trio, Rush. As a long time fan, I’ve sung along to and have been inspired by these words for nearly twenty-five years. However, I’ve never thought about them in an educational context until recently. Something about these words resonated with me and seemed to capture the spirit of a personal and professional journey over the past twelve months. These lyrics will set the philosophical tone for this writing as well as the organizational structure.

To Mould A New Reality
For the most part, I believe, students hold their teachers in high esteem. They look to the adult in the classroom as the academic leader from whom to learn. Most teachers aspire to improve technique and methods to improve the intellectual experiences for their students. The professional is always looking for a “better way” to communicate the subject to their students.

For the past thirteen years of teaching, I've enjoyed good rapport with my students. As much as I try to be myself at the front of the class, in retrospect, I've kept a certain distance between the children and myself. To avoid feeling vulnerable, I've withheld many personal emotions, especially my fears and weaknesses.

Getting through as much curriculum as possible is always paramount but has become increasingly difficult for many teachers who feel stretched to the absolute limit. An increased emphasis on assessment and testing, keeping up with new technology and curriculum, adapting to new reporting procedures have left me feeling paper-thin. How can I do all this and support my students’ social and emotional development? The Ministry of Education (1993) outlines these two goals with the addition of student career development. It also provides performance standards (Ministry of Education, 2001) that encourage the infusion of activities that promote behaviors such as kindness, responsibility, cooperation, and empathy. These performance standards are “intended to support instructional decision making” (12) and “should not be used as a stand-alone measure” (13).

I had been giving much thought to the strategy of combining the goals of intellectual and social development by explicitly and directly teaching virtues and moral character through literature. Consequently, I embarked upon a Teacher Action Research study guided by the following three questions: 1. How can I use literature to help students identify virtues? 2. How can I help my students express their understandings of virtues and make personal connections with them? 3. What implications does teaching virtues have for me as the teacher, for my students, for the classroom community?
Initially, the majority of my planning, methods, data collection, and planning were devoted to these “technique-oriented” questions. Research anxieties and the quest for “hard data” distracted me at first from my third research question: would the atmosphere of the class feel any different as a result of digging deeper into the literary character qualities as well as our own personal traits of character?

If I am to hold a high place in my student’s hearts and minds, it lies with me to mould this new reality, closer to my heart, in order to get closer to my students’ hearts. I’ve always tried to set a good academic and personal example for my students. Expecting them to share personal experiences and feelings—either on paper or in class discussions—prompted me to reciprocate these actions. Could an open forum of sincere, honest, emotional discussions bridge the gap, or “schism” of sorts, between teacher and students?

No printed word, nor spoken plea can teach young minds what they should be. Not all the books on all the shelves—but what the teachers are themselves.
(Rudyard Kipling in Rose, 2004).

I have no children of my own, so the students with whom I share most of every day become “my kids.” I desire deeply for their reality and future to be a caring, kind, compassionate place. The world around us does not always inspire me to believe that the influences and examples set for them by others in high places (government, media, peers), will be a good and virtuous world—one closer to the heart. I feel compelled, therefore, to mould a new reality that comes from a place closer to my own heart that will touch them closer to their hearts. A connection made? I hope so.

The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.

The place from where I am writing, therefore, is not so much from the methods and techniques I discovered to be effective in teaching virtues, but from a passionate feeling developed within my heart itself. And it tells me that if teachers are to be held in high places by our students, we need to ensure that the examples we set for our children are of high moral standard. When they are not, I cringe at the reality we help create for the students in our care.

Here is an example—my first of three critical incidences throughout
my study—where the “moral bar” was set a few rungs too low and I felt called to respond.

Critical Incident 1

Blacksmiths and Artists

Interest in the teaching of virtues and morals is as old as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Two contemporary proponents of character education are William J. Bennett and Linda Kavelin Popov. Bennett’s (1997) work contains stories that families and teachers can share to learn what virtues are, why you need them, and how you get them. Popov’s (2000) program is a structured “course,” which espouses a philosophy that focuses on virtues, which according to her are “the context of our character, the elements of the human spirit” (xix).

She also clarifies and distinguishes between values and virtues: values are what we care about and are culturally specific while virtues are more elemental and universally accepted. I drew upon Popov’s resource frequently during my study to provide the students with clear definitions of virtues and as a springboard to discussions regarding how and why to practice them. Each student was provided with a “virtues guide” based on Popov’s resource to help him or her as a reference and clarification tool.

Lickona (1991) also advocates for moral education in public schools. His passionate rationale outlines how declining parenting skills, violence, and numerous other signs of moral decline have led to the core, moral problem in our schools. He explains several important reasons why morals need to be taught: they are urgently needed, there is common ethical ground, growing support for character education and the simple fact that it is doable. Lickona acknowledges storytelling as an effective way to teach virtues because it does so by “attraction rather than compulsion” (79).

Contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) emphasizes the need for self-knowledge and independent practical reasoning. MacIntyre illuminates the indispensable nature of virtues to precipitate human flourishing. Furthermore, he describes how virtues and independent practical reasoning act as part of a social network of
relationships whereby people need to be morally educated to understand that giving and receiving are not necessarily equal and that care must be given unconditionally on the basis of its need by others.

Nel Noddings is also known for her efforts and philosophy to promote the ethics of caring in education. Noddings (2005) insists that teachers must stay in touch with their students through care as this will help teachers evaluate their efforts to teach moral virtues in their classrooms: “we must accept responsibility for another’s moral perfection” (3). Even though individuals cannot deny responsibility for their actions, the community that produces them cannot escape its responsibility in making them what they have become.

With only so many minutes in the school day to accomplish all that is expected of teachers, how can we attempt to achieve this moral development in the midst of tests, assessments, record-keeping and the like? By infusing the goals of social and intellectual development by explicitly and directly teaching virtues through literature, the moral imagination of students can be enhanced. This concept is illuminated by Vigen Guroian (1998) as the goal of moral education through great literature and fairy tales. He argues that a good moral education addresses both dimensions of human nature—cognitive and affective—and that stories are an effective medium to provide an education that stirs the moral imagination.

**Forging Creativity**

Teachers assume these roles of “blacksmith” and “artist” on a daily basis. We are given the curriculum but not necessarily the strategies to deliver it. The blacksmithing and artistry comes through practice and experience, trial and error. What we do with the curriculum is usually left up to us. We want to do a good job that benefits our students and gives us personal and professional satisfaction.

In the past thirteen years of my career, creativity and methods have been technique and task-oriented in nature, dedicated to delivering “the subject.” Upon reflection, I’ve been cutting myself and my students short by not forging creativity from my heart to create a more
meaningful connection with the subject and my students. As such, the Language Arts Reading program that I embarked upon for study during my Action Research was “forged on my own moral anvil” of sorts. Teaching not only the basic literary elements but also the character traits and virtues through the medium of literature was an effective way to open the door for the students and me to share experiences, ideals, values, and personal goals. Even though this was not the initial focus for my study, a positive, “connected” feeling in the classroom was created,

How was this accomplished? Ironically, by focusing less on the pedagogical technique of teaching virtues and more on the dedication and willingness to speak from the heart about what we had read together: Parker Palmer (1998) alludes to this when he states: “Technique is what the teachers use until the real teachers arrive” (5).

Traditional class routines and student expectations for work completion continued to reflect my normal teaching practices. However, instead of responding to literature through traditional chapter questions and summary style assignments, students were asked to reflect and share opinions regarding a story character’s moral or immoral behavior. A selection of short stories from William J. Bennett’s The Book of Virtues For Young People (1997), picture books such as The Other Side (Woodson, 2001) and You Are Special (Lucado, 1997) and two novels Bridge To Terabithia (Paterson, 1972) and Because of Winn Dixie (DiCamillo, 2000) were shared together (read aloud mostly by me). I chose this selection of literature based on their potential to illustrate positive role models and virtuous story character behavior. The following are examples of the types of student assignments intended to elicit their understanding of virtues and ability to make personal connections with them.

Appendix A

Appendix B

Discussions around the characters’ virtues expanded into a personal and relevant context for my students. Many discussion and written response prompts began with “Imagine how you would feel if ...” or “How do you think someone would feel if you showed them ....”

Sowing A New Mentality
As teachers, we also assume the role of philosopher and ploughman. We brainstorm, plan and put into action experiences that we hope will enhance learning for our students. What kind of mentality did I help “sow” by using literature to teach and talk about virtues with my students? What did I learn by thinking and acting closer to my heart?

As I alluded earlier, my attention to the first two research questions dominated my efforts. As I collected and analyzed student work samples, videotaped interview transcripts, comprehension test results, and my action research journal, it became apparent that my students were indeed learning the meanings of virtues and making personal connections with them. Additionally, their learning of virtues was not at the expense of their traditional comprehension of the literature. In fact, comprehension test results for Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson, 1972) was at an 83% class average. What was less obvious but became more noticeable over the course of the research were the changes in classroom atmosphere that became more open and trusting and personal discussions around virtues became a regular part of our days.

Relations amongst grade six students can be challenging in numerous ways and I have often had to play the part of mediator and conflict resolution expert, but not this year. I have never in thirteen years needed to resolve fewer disputes between students. Two distinct and close-knit groups of girls rarely quarreled and the historical “boy-girl” teasing barely materialized. When asked to reflect upon life lessons learned following Bridge to Terabithia (Paterson, 1972), Darren crystallized this positive classroom feeling:

I have learned from reading Bridge to Terabithia that you should stand up for people that everyone picks on for really dumb reasons because they could turn out to be a really cool person. (And maybe even your best friend).

Rosie puts it all into perspective when she shared what virtues she had been inspired to work on:

Caring: to care for people and things that I thought I’d never
care about. I just need to look at it in a different way.

A student questionnaire at the end of the study echoed more of these sentiments. Two-thirds of the students participating in the study (20 out of 29) felt that discussing and reading about virtues helped make the class environment positive. Over sixty percent responded that they learned how to solve conflicts and over one-half indicated that their study of virtues helped improve their friendships:

I think it has [improved the atmosphere/tone of the classroom environment] people have been nicer to each other then [sic] before so I hope we can make this an even better place to be before the end of the school year (anonymous).

Yes, because I think the virtues made a lot of people in my classroom have been more nice and expressive and have been getting along (anonymous).

Yes it has helped people to put these virtues in action (anonymous).

Yes it has I know a lot more people I have a lot more friends then (sic) I ever had before so I’m quite happy (anonymous).

Seeing my students “get along” so well was very rewarding for me personally and made my professional life much easier. Spending more time teaching and less time resolving peer relation problems was a real blessing that I never anticipated happening. But what were the implications for me personally?

At the beginning of my study I felt a lot of anxiety about my research. I was concerned about choosing the right words to elicit the “perfect data” for my analysis. The origin of my research focus—to teach virtues—came from the heart but the delivery was coming from the mind. I felt divided and “false,” not true to whom I was as an individual. Palmer (1998) addresses this issue in education by asserting that

when a person is healthy and whole, the head and the heart are both-and, not either-or, and that teaching that honors that paradox can help make us all more whole (64).

As I began to honour this paradox through my own open and honest participation in our discussions of the connections between the literature and virtues, my perceptions and life changed not only in the classroom but everywhere I went.
By honoring the spirit of virtues and my own study of them, my heart began to lift. Not only were my teaching moments more relaxed and honest, but my interactions with students at all times of the day also became much more open and caring. I felt less need to hide my fears and weaknesses and instead, ask for support from my students to get through. For example, instead of hiding the fact that I had a bad headache or was feeling ill, I felt much more comfortable and confident to ask for a little bit of extra cooperation and compassion. Even when my personal vulnerabilities became very public, I was treated with dignity and respect, as witnessed by the second critical incident I’d like to share:

**Critical Incident 2**

The rapport with my students throughout my research study was elevated to a level I had never experienced before. In the past, I’ve shown care and kindness to my students through my actions of teaching mixed in with a good dose of humour and gentle sarcasm. By incorporating a regular “language of virtues” and encouraging an open, tolerant, safe atmosphere that demonstrated who I was not only as a teacher, but also as a person, an air of care and kindness permeated throughout the class.

These were my perceptions. Did my students feel the same way about me as I did about them? Over sixty percent indicated on the year-end questionnaire that they learned more about their teacher through our discussion and reading about virtues. Over one-half also felt that they had developed a better relationship with me. Perhaps as I laughed—and cried—with them they felt it much safer to do the same and that the “lesson behind the lesson” was truly for them and not on them.

How did they demonstrate these feelings of mutual care and kindness? Sharing happy and sad times from home, keeping me company while on supervision, teasing me, thanking me, looking me in the eyes and saying “Bye, Mr. Allan” at the end of the day instead of rushing out the door at the bell. I can’t say there was a pivotal “tipping point” or dramatic moment when everything changed all at once (Gladwell, 2002) and the classroom atmosphere was transformed in an instant. The aforementioned are just a few notable examples. There were many
more that were more of a “feeling” and hard for me to put into words—but I know there were genuinely there. So, I’ll let one of “my girls” say it for me:

Critical Incident 3

Sailing Into Destiny

Who is this captain? The teacher? The students? Administration? At the helm of the ship, each of us controls the path one wishes to take. If my students are to be their own captain, they need a reliable, moral assistant to help them in becoming intelligent, responsible, caring members of society. As much as we’d like to—or to at least feel the need—teachers cannot always be the captain and guide the ship. Ultimately, our students make personal decisions that will affect the outcome of where their ship sails. I plan to be there for them whenever they need to help chart waters, hold the wheel steady, or keep a hand on the rudder to support them in achieving life-long success.

Palmer (1998) states that it is possible, through traditional teaching methods, to be successful by maintaining independence from our students; however, he counterpoints this “problem” by reminding us to put part of our fate into the hands of our students by being true to ourselves and who we are, as part of our students fate is put into our hands. This “way of teaching yields not only more community but also more learning by drawing us more deeply into the community of truth” (139).
Students are not the only benefactors of this positive community. As I have experienced, a personal and professional transformation is possible when you speak, listen, and teach from the heart. Teaching virtues as well as how and why to use them begins to develop a class “language of virtues” will become a part of my daily “lexicon.” Instead of expecting and asking my students to “be nice” to each other, I can use more precise vocabulary such as “acceptance,” “compassion,” or “caring” because I know we have discussed what these mean and have read literature where characters are demonstrating these qualities. Activities that require total inclusion can be prefaced with reminders about stories we’ve shared together: “Remember Punchinello” has been a reminder I’ve used with my students when beginning group activities where patience and acceptance are required.

This September I am moving to a new school. I have the privilege of joining a brand new staff at a newly built middle-secondary school for its inaugural year. Thinking about how important tone and culture are to the success of any school—and especially for a new one—I frequently reflected upon experiences during my study. During planning meetings to develop school goals and a mission statement, I felt the urgent need to include virtues and an ethic of care as the foundation of our school’s destiny. As Noddings (2005) reminds us that we are responsible for the community in which we live, we cannot ignore the fact that educating the heart is as important as educating the mind. Theodore Roosevelt also recognized this need and expressed this sentiment with much urgency: “To educate a person without morals is to educate a menace to society” (Lickona, 1991, 3).

I have learned that it is not necessary to separate myself from my students in order to teach them life-lessons. In fact, it has become apparent that it would have been impossible to share these lessons with any genuineness if I did not share myself in the process. I was worried that my students would feel “lectured” and dismiss the content of our discussions. Luckily, they did not as indicated on returned questionnaires. It was awkward at times during the initial stages of the research, as I felt somewhat uncomfortable speaking so openly and directly from my heart.

Telling my students what makes me sad and when I need care or compassion did not feel entirely natural. Doing so at the beginning of the year, I believe, would have been more difficult, since we were still at the stage of getting used to and learning about each other. However, as the comfort level increased, I felt less vulnerable in sharing personal experiences and telling them how much I care about them and their future. The more this occurred, the more care I was shown in return. It
was like a cycle of “give and give” between me and my students instead of just “give and take.” This was a wonderful thing to be a part of.

Careful, thoughtful curricular planning with literature rich in virtues will become part of my professional future. Through choices made from the heart, I hope I can continue to establish a classroom culture where individuals feel safe, cared for, and respected by not only their peers but by their teacher as well. And I hope I will feel the care, kindness, and compassion given to me by my students in return. This is the reality which I believe can be molded by “those who hold high places,” so long as teachers chart a destiny for us and our students that is forever kept “Closer to the Heart.”

References


1 To protect the identity of the students, all names are pseudonyms


**About the Author**

**Dave Allan** is currently teaching Middle School Phys Ed and Humanities in the Fraser Valley after spending thirteen years in an elementary school. An avid fan of anything athletic, he takes time to attend yoga and curling on a weekly basis when not coaching volleyball, basketball, or track and field at school. Left over spare time is consumed by a love for fishing and a twenty-five year passion for the legendary Canadian rock trio, Rush.