The Unique Opportunity to Teach Effective Character Education in the English Classroom

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“Character Education” is one of the new buzz phrases in education. From elementary to secondary, and into higher education, there is a sense of urgency to develop programs that will teach young people a code of ethics and rein in what seems to be an epidemic of unruly, ill-mannered, self-centered younger generations. Programs range from B. F. Skinner’s behavior modification to Kohlberg’s cognitive-structural levels of motivation. Each one is attempting to solve the problem of how to instill a moral code of ethics without religion that will affect a change in how young people live their lives. At its core, Character Education seeks to make young people more responsible and better citizens. It has become apparent in the past couple of decades that schools must not only teach reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic; they must help individuals to grow morally and ethically.

The United States Military Academy's mission is to educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army. “A leader of character”—how do we define this? A better question is: How do we instill this in a way that is not boring, redundant, and --- boring? In other words, how do we make those synapses create a connection that affects a change in the character of the cadet?

According to the Army Online Study Guide, a guide for “Soldier of the Month” boards, “Character is essential to successful leadership.” Here, “a leader of character” is defined as one who possesses three specific traits: Army Values- Empathy-Warrior Ethos. West Point has an entire institute dedicated to Excellence in Military Ethics. The United States Military Academy Preparatory School’s (USMAPS or the Prep School) purpose is “to prepare candidates selected by the United States Military Academy Admission’s office for the academic, physical, and military challenges of the United States Military Academy at West Point.” USMAPS has a Military Science course which meets once per week and focuses on indoctrinating CCs into the Army Values. While the Military Science component of USMAPS could be a dynamic program that motivates cadet candidates (CCs) towards becoming leaders of character and challenges CCs to critically evaluate their ethical choices, it is a series of lackluster PowerPoint presentations on the Army Values, followed by standard, rote testing. These young people want to become leaders of character. They have the desire, faith, and effort to strive for that ultimate goal: admission to
West Point and completion of a four year college program that will lead them to a career in the military. USMAPS has the unique situation that provides the opportunity to better prepare CCs for West Point by incorporating elements of the Military Science course into the English Literature portion of USMAPS’ program. By providing real world examples of leaders of character through literature, I believe that I have instilled in my students the essence of the Army Values, established a sense of Empathy in my students, and grounded them in how to live the Warrior Ethos—all while keeping students motivated.

The USMAPS English curriculum is a standardized year of instruction, designed to remediate grammar skills first and then progress to college level critical reading and writing. Separated into four quarters, the curriculum allows for instructor options in the second half of the year. Some instructors teach Shakespeare. Some teach short stories exclusively. Others stick with essays and nonfiction. We are, after all, Instructors of English with a deep love for literature and reading, in general. Because our course is quite structured, having some freedom to incorporate our own literature choices motivates us which, in turn, motivates our students.

After my first year of teaching at the Prep School, I realized three things: my students were not really “getting” the Army Values (this was evident in their words and actions); students at USMAPS had a higher number of Honor issues than direct admits when they reached West Point; my students were consistently interested in military topics and leaders. I saw the opportunity to incorporate some Army Values into my instructor options. To that end, I discussed this issue with colleagues, researched books with potential, and settled on two novels that provided both good and bad examples of leaders: The Killer Angels by Michael Shaara and Band of Brothers by Stephen Ambrose. For the past four years (this will be the fifth), I have used these books with great success to explore the concept of character, how to recognize it, and how to live it. I have found that by integrating the Army Values and Warrior Ethos into daily discussions, my students leave USMAPS on solid ground, understanding what true leaders of character look like.

For those who may not know The Killer Angels or Band of Brothers, The Killer Angels is a historical fiction novel, set during the three days of Gettysburg. Starting the day before the battle, each day is told through the eyes of many different characters. The reader must then put the entire day together to understand the action of the entire day. Throughout the story, readers learn about the tactics employed and the decisions that were made by various leaders. Using the Army Values as their paradigm, CCs take the classroom discussions through a range of questions from: “Did Longstreet cause the Confederates to lose?” “Does that make Longstreet a bad leader?” “Did Lee mess up?” “How important was it for Buford to take the high ground with only a brigade?” “What was JEB Stuart doing?” “Where can I find a man like Joshua Chamberlain?” In fact, students are supplied with a copy of FM 6-22, The Army Leadership Manual which uses Joshua Chamberlain as the ultimate role model for a leader of character. Through classroom discussions, journals, and in-class and out-of-class essays, CCs hone their understanding of the Army Values and how a leader of character displays each quality. The
classroom discussions that are spawned increase instructor/student interaction and maintain a high level of motivation in the cadet candidates.

*Band of Brothers* is a collection of memoirs from the soldiers of Easy Company, 506 Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division during World War II. This book was adapted as an acclaimed HBO miniseries. Ironically, it seems that fewer and fewer of my students have seen this series in its entirety. As a reward, I show the entire series at the end of the school year. This book provides both excellent and poor examples of leaders. The book takes Easy Company from Camp Toccoa, Georgia, to Normandy, to Bastogne, to Germany and the end of the war. Everyone leaves the book with a common hatred for Captain Soboul and equally deepened admiration for Major Dick Winters. Classroom discussions, journals, and essays demonstrate a gained appreciation for the profession of arms and a deeper understanding of how the Army Values imbue a leader with character. The discussions are rich and become focused on self-improvement. Again, through classroom discussions and cadet candidate interactions, motivation is high, and the classroom becomes an environment for improvement.

CCs set up a journal similar to Benjamin Franklin’s where he completed a daily evaluation of his thirteen virtues. Every day, he would simply mark whether he had been successful or not with each virtue and write a sentence or two about how he could improve. Using the Army Values as their virtues, CCs keep journals while they are in my classroom. They evaluate their own daily performances and write a one page reflection at the end of the year. By connecting real world leaders of character to their own daily performance, CCs are learning, applying, and synthesizing the knowledge that will take them to West Point and beyond. This is done without compromising the standards set for the English curriculum at USMAPS. CCs leave my classroom with a clear definition of the Warrior Ethos and how it applies to the Army Values, and vice versa. By integrating these concepts with literature, CCs develop a sense of empathy that is deeply rooted in this foundation that they have now created. But we do not stop there, for while this endeavor is underway, CCs are still completing the standardized curriculum, which in the Fourth Quarter includes poetry, a play, and another novel. They have become so accustomed to the “Army Values” paradigm that they can apply these virtues to Macbeth, or Hamlet, or Prospero.

Many students remark that they will continue their journals as they grow in character at West Point. The end-of-year surveys by students consistently rate this aspect of my classroom instruction as their favorite and most helpful thing they learned at USMAPS. Comments include: “I wish everything was taught like this”; “I will take these lessons with me forever”; “This class taught me about life”; “Why can’t I learn math this way?”; “This is the first book that I ever really read”; “I am buying Bill Guarnere’s book next”; “I want to read more books like this”; “I can’t believe how much history I learned in English!”

Since I began this program, to my knowledge, there have been only three Honor violations out of the 325 cadet candidates that I have taught. Out of the first thirty-four students
that I taught in my first year, there were at least that many – if not more! Did I get all really good students for the past five years? It is possible. Was that first year an anomaly? This is also possible. But what I DO know is that my students stay motivated, learn using an interdisciplinary approach, and become more aware of how their behavior influences others— for better or worse.

West Point has known for some time now that character education is an essential component for developing a good citizen—a good citizen soldier. The civilian population has taken a somewhat clinical approach to resolving the issue of values training. Extrinsic rewards will go only so far, and working through Kohlberg’s levels of motivation is helpful in understanding human growth development but cannot supply character development. By presenting literature with real world leaders and using the Army Values for evaluation criteria, we can quicken the journey for cadet candidates on their way to becoming leaders of character, keep them motivated, and provide a high quality education.

The Master Teacher Program guidelines point out that this paper should not focus on how I have be able to improve cadet performance, but, in the end, I reflect and evaluate my performance on how much I have affected a change in my students. I am reminded of a song from “Good-bye, Mr. Chips”:

In the evening of my life I shall look to the sunset,
At a moment in my life when the night is due.
And the question I shall ask only I can answer.
Was I brave and strong and true?
Did I fill the world with love my whole life through?

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1 (United States Military Academy, West Point home page)
2 (Army Study Guide)
3 (United States Military Academy, West Point home page)
4 (Shaara)
6 (Ambrose)