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BOOKS BUILD CHARACTER
Using Literature to Develop Morality in a Secondary English Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Character education is a worthwhile and attainable goal in a secondary English classroom. Effective strategies for using literature to develop the morality of students have been discovered by educators. This essay includes a justification for moral education, an outline of methodology for implementing character education, and a character education centered unit plan for teaching the books *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers and *Whirligig* by Paul Fleischman.

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Justification for Character Education

President Theodore Roosevelt's belief on education was that, "To educate a person in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society." His statement is the essence of the justification for character education. Also known as moral education or values clarification, character education is, in short, the teaching of students in a way that attempts to develop their morality. Before moving into why our students need character education and why the study of literature in an English class is the ideal in-school context for developing character, I will discuss where my personal interest in the subject stems from.

If I could put the basis for why I care so much about character education into one sentence it would read like this: because I have seen in my own life and the lives of those close to me the blessings that come from making the right decisions and the negative consequences that come from making wrong ones. While I am certainly not perfect, I have made and continue to make many right decisions in several different areas of my own life such as academics, athletics, and lifestyle decisions. Each of the little right decisions I make in these areas have added up and resulted in tremendous blessings. Academically, my choosing to put hours and hours into studying and completing school-work has paid off with very high grades and multiple Academic All-American honors. Athletically, my commitment to doing all that I can to make the most of the talents that God has given me has resulted in my becoming one of the best football players in the country at my position. Thirdly, making the right lifestyle decisions like staying away from drugs and alcohol has helped me to stay away from many of the problems that occur as a result of drug

use, and has enabled me to become a role model for young teammates and youth in the community. So I have seen blessings come from making good decisions in my life, and I have also seen troubles come from making poor decisions in my friends' lives. Three of my high school football teammates who are the same age as me were good enough to play football in college. None of them are still playing football in college. Why? It is because poor lifestyle decisions prematurely ended their careers. One of them never even made to the school where he had a full scholarship because he got caught selling drugs in the bathroom at school. The other two skipped class, got into drugs and partying, and flunked out of the universities they were playing at. I have seen the same things happen to my teammates here at Penn State. I have seen guys with all the talent in the world fail out of school, or get kicked out school, or get kicked off of the team because of bad decisions like not putting any effort in academically, or partying too hard, or breaking the law. And all of those observed experiences have led me to this conclusion: Character matters. Decision-making matters. And they matter a lot, and they affect all parts of a person's life. It is for these reasons that I believe improving the character of my students is the most important target I can attempt to guide them toward. I do not believe that making character education a central goal will detract from more common aims of English classes such as developing students' reading and writing skills, because I will utilize reading and writing as a means for character development. The overarching reason why I aim to build students values is that doing so will affect change on a student for the rest of their lives, as opposed to the goals of many teachers which only affect students for their academic lives. For example, if I helped a student to become a

better literary critic, that would be great because for the next few years in high school and then in college they would more effectively critique literature, that is, if they even were required to perform this task. But after college, how often will they need that ability? For 95% of the population, the answer is not a lot. However, 100% of the population will be making moral judgments for their entire lives, so developing their judgment and character is a goal worth striving for.

Another reason why I believe character education to be important is that a large number of teens in our world today are not making the best choices and they need help in making these choices. This help does not always come from their parents. There is a lot of evidence out there of today's teens needing character education. A study conducted in 1989 found that 25% of middle school students were involved in some combination of smoking, drinking, drug use, and sex. 50% of these students were involved in at least one (Lickona 1991). A more recent study discovered that The world of today's teen is marked by high rates of violence, drug use, risky sexual behavior, drop-outs, and suicide. If these examples from the world of teens are not enough, perhaps one from the world of adults can help show the need for character education. Bernie Madoff has become famous recently for his Ponzi schemes where he used investment fraud to make 50 billion dollars illegally. Madoff had to be a highly intelligent individual to pull off his scheme without being caught for such a long time, but his story is a perfect example that intelligence is important, but intelligence without character is insufficient and can even be dangerous as was the case with Maydoff.

Research and Methodology

If the question of the need for character education has been answered, the subsequent question is how can character education be done effectively? The next section of this essay will provide a summary of major research done on that question and then outline a methodology for implementing character education into the secondary English classroom. Karen E. Bohlin wrote a groundbreaking work on the subject that was just published in 2005 titled Teaching Character Education through Literature: Awakening the moral imagination in secondary classrooms. This work consists of several chapters outlining the nature of moral choice and desire, and the ways teachers can encourage students' ethical reflection on a literary character's growth and development (Bohlin 2005). The second half consists of four case studies on the moral choices made by the protagonists of four novels commonly taught in high schools. Bohlin's principles for fostering ethical reflection and questions asked of students about the decision-making processes of characters are beneficial to the teacher interested in character education. Thomas Lickona's Educating for Character: How our Schools can Teach Respect and Responsibility is another landmark work on the subject. His lengthy work details why we need values education, how it can be taught in our pluralistic public schools without offending anyone, practical strategies for teaching character in a classroom, and ways to involve the whole school and community in the character education effort (Lickona 1991). The work shows in depth how to cultivate the values of respect and responsibility. John Zbikowski's "Literature as the Laboratory of Moral Life: Building Moral Communities through Literature Study" explains how literature can be a

moral laboratory where authors and readers engage in thought experiments and reflection on human decisions, actions, and consequences (Zbikowski, Collins, 1994). Sharon Andrews' "Teaching Kids to Care: Exploring Values through Literature and Inquiry" puts forward several ideas useful to educating for character such as providing examples of how literature and inquiry based investigations of values can work in classrooms, and providing instructional strategies that promote self-directed study and exploration of values (Andrews 1994). "Moral Education through Literature", an article by Natasa Pantic, addresses some of the difficulties of using literature for moral advancement including whether or not examining literature for purposes of morality takes away from its aesthetic component, and if principles learned through the study of fictional characters can lead to actual changes in the behavior of students (Pantic 2006).

The methodology for answering the research question involves carefully planning *what* literature is read and *how* that literature is read. The type of literature, according to Bohlin, should be narrative novels, since a novel's, "character's lives give readers access to the private, highly-personalized world of moral motivation," (Bohlin 2005) and because students are more likely to be engaged with a compelling narrative than with any other form of literature. So the type of literature is a narrative, and the type of narrative is one that leads to discussion of right and wrong and of choices and consequences. The narrative must be one that makes the greatest number of students think about their own life and decisions.

Since the type of literature question has been answered, the next question is how to

use that literature to develop the decision-making skills of students. There are two categories for answering the how. The first is creating an individual response to the work that forces the reader to examine their own assumptions about the story world and their own world. Students must be prompted to examine their own feelings about what they read and then be led to see the link between these feelings and their own life experiences and the link between their feelings and the features of the text (Zbikowski, Collins, 1994). Some activities that can be used to encourage this analysis include reading journals and dramatizing literary works. A reading journal makes readers interact with the text as they are reading, and the teacher can provide certain questions to be answered at certain points in the story to ensure that students are reflecting on the decision-making processes of the characters and the outcomes of those decisions. Another benefit of having students write an individual journal is that it forces each student to analyze the text whereas in other forms of discussion such as teacher led whole group discussion or small group discussion single students can merely sit quietly and observe without thinking critically about the text. Forms of writing other than journaling will be used because writing forces students to synthesize their thoughts on a subject and creates deeper, more lasting meaning than most other tasks teachers require students to complete. Drama activities can cause the characters to become more real for the students, as they will see the story world from the characters' perspectives and gain insight into their mental processes and emotions. Drama activities are beneficial because by having students take the perspective of another develops empathy, which serves the aim of character education. These activities are also beneficial because many

students enjoy the chance to act, and so a drama activity can be useful to break up a unit that has a lot of writing or other activities that students view as being “hard” or “a lot of work.”

The second category describing how to use literature for building decision-making abilities is called group process or formation of community by Zbikowski. It is not enough for students to individually interact with the text, they must also be involved in small group or whole class discussion to increase the likelihood that they see beyond their personal perspective. When forced to deal with other viewpoints, students will practice reason, tolerance, and synthesis of ideas (Zbikowski, Collins, 1994). Also, discussion provides students with an opportunity to make a public affirmation of their values, which has the effects of organizing and strengthening those beliefs. It is essential for these discussions that the classroom has an atmosphere of trust and caring, which must be initiated by the teacher. Teacher led whole group discussion is important to include at times and especially in the beginning of year so the teacher can deliberately model the manner in which moral discourse occurs in a literary community. Also, if there is a particular aspect of character that the teacher is trying to emphasize in a particular lesson, the discussion will need the guidance of the teacher to ensure the discussion stays focused and fully explores all areas of the topic. But alternatives to this staple of English classes are necessary to get more students involved. Smagorinsky, in his book *Teaching English by Design*, describes dozens of these activities. Some possibilities are talk show format, informal writing as the basis for discussion, homebody, four square activity, concept map, memory box, and narrative from a

different character's perspective (Smagorinsky 2008). All are excellent ways to get more students thinking about the novel, and each, if adapted properly by the teacher, could certainly serve the aim of developing character and decision-making skills.

This plan will meet the goal of developing values in students because it will not try to preach values at them, but will encourage students to analyze the decisions of literary characters and their effects. An approach to character education where a teacher would try to tell students what good character is or what decisions are right and wrong would inevitably be rejected by students as some adult trying to tell them what to do. Instead, students will make their own judgments about the decisions and effects of characters in novels and will relate them to their own lives. This will be effective because students will enjoy the process of reading and reflecting more if the story becomes personal, and students tend to learn more and be more motivated to learn if material relates to their lives. Also, if students are creating their own conclusions/creating their own knowledge, this is a high order mental process on Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Objectives meaning knowledge will be retained for a longer period of time. This retention will increase the likelihood of student application of learning to their own decision-making. While it is unrealistic to think all students will be highly engaged with each narrative, given the wide range of activities and novels that will be used to get students to think I could expect that all students will be involved in analysis of character's and their own decision-making processes at some point, and hopefully at many points throughout a school year.

A Character Education Centered Unit of Instruction

The next section of this essay will detail the character education focused unit I created and implemented into a tenth grade English classroom. In my unit students studied the novels *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, and *Whirligig* by Paul Fleischman. *Monster* was the primary text studied with *Whirligig*, a short text, used as a supplement. A brief summary of each will be beneficial for any readers unfamiliar with the texts. *Monster* is the story of sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon who is on trial for felony murder, a crime that carries the penalty of twenty plus years in prison, or even the death penalty. The story is written as a script for a movie of the trial being written by Steve, with Steve's personal journal entries from prison interjected. The story follows his trial from beginning to end, with different flashbacks included to give more of the back-story. Throughout the novel Steve struggles with the thought of spending life in prison, with his identity being a "Monster" as the title says or being a good kid, and with what his trial is doing to his family. *Whirligig* tells the story of Brent Bishop, a high school student trying to fit in at a new school. Brent gets humiliated at a party full of his peers and drives away from the party angry and intoxicated. He tries to crash the car and kill himself but instead he hits another car and kills an innocent girl. Because Brent is emotionally wrecked, prosecutors choose to let the victims family select the punishment instead of putting him in jail. They decide Brent should build four whirligigs, essentially giant wind chimes, one in each corner of the United States. He travels the country by bus building whirligigs and learning to deal with what he has done. These were chosen for several reasons. Both are novels and therefore give the reader a chance

to see how characters attitudes, beliefs, and actions play out in the long run. Both have main characters who are relatively close in age to the students and who live in time periods close to the present day, which means students should be able to identify with the characters and therefore will be more likely to connect what they learn about the characters to their own lives. Also, specifically with the primary text *Monster*, the story is written in a unique fashion as a movie script, and is a compelling narrative that students will be more likely to be engaged in. Above all they were selected because they dealt very well with the themes for my unit. The two character education centered themes for my unit as laid out in the unit's essential questions were:

Where do people gain their sense of identity from, and how does that affect the way they live?

What are the possible consequences of our individual actions?

These are to be introduced to students on the first day of the unit to help to provide direction for the unit, to give them a lens through which to look at the texts, and to answer the question which all students ask at least internally, Why are we reading this? The guiding questions give all our reading and activities a purpose, which is to explore the answers to the questions together in a classroom community.

The first activity to be done before reading begins is called Ethical Dilemma Scenarios. Here is the activity:

For each presented hypothetical scenario, choose which of the options you would select yourself if you were in the situation. Then write a paragraph (4-6 sentences) stating why you picked the option you did and/or stating why you did not choose the other options. There is not a “right” answer, and you do not need to pick what you think the teacher wants to hear to get credit. Be honest. You will get credit if you write a solid paragraph explaining why you chose the option you did.

Scenario 1:

You are by yourself pushing a cart full of items down the aisles at Wal-Mart and you find a gift card sitting on a shelf. There are a few people nearby who it could belong to, but you have no way of knowing whose it is. What would you do?

- 1 Ask the people nearby if it belongs to them, and give it to them if they say its theirs
- 2 Take the card and use it to pay for your items
- 3 Bring the card to a manager and tell them you found it
- 4 Walk away, leaving the card as if you never saw it

Scenario 2:

Your dad has been out of work for months, and your family is in financial trouble. Your family will be evicted from your house in a week if the rent that you owe, which totals \$4,000, is not paid. A friend of yours tells you about a highly illegal but highly profitable opportunity that could make you \$5,000 in less than a week. Doing this illegal activity will almost surely make the money you need to pay the rent for

your family, but if caught, there is a very good chance you will end up in prison.

What would you do?

1 Nothing, pass up the opportunity

2 Do the illegal activity to try to make your family's rent money

Scenario 3:

You are taking a big math test and are struggling. You know that you will not do very well if you finish and turn it in on your own, but you have an opportunity to cheat off of the smartest person in the class, and there is pretty much no chance of getting caught as the teacher isn't paying any attention to the class. What would you do?

1 Cheat off of the smartest person in the class

2 Finish on your own without cheating

Scenario 4:

You and your friends created a website that said terrible things about fellow students and teachers at your school. The website contains obscene comments and scandalous pictures. An administrator has discovered the website and wants to find and expel from school the creators of the website. The principal calls you into his office and says that a student told him that you were involved in creating the website. What would you tell him?

1 That you and only you created the website

- 2 That you had a part in creating the website along with your friends, and then you name your friends who were involved
- 3 That you had absolutely no part in making website and you've never even seen it before

This activity is intended to serve several purposes. It serves as a pre-assessment of their ability to reason through actions and their possible consequences. The important part of the activity is not so much which option they pick but how they justify their choice. The students' paragraph explanations of their choices serve as a window into their moral critical thinking. It is this ability to think critically about decisions and their consequences that I aim to improve with the unit, and I need to know where they are before analyzing how to help them progress. A teacher-led whole group discussion is important as a follow up to the students writing their own answers. This gives the students an opportunity to encounter other viewpoints and, with guiding questions from the teacher, to discover flaws and shortsightedness in the reasoning behind certain decisions.

After this introductory activity students will begin reading *Monster* in class. Often scenes will be acted out by members of the class. This is generally successful because students like to get out of their seats and move around, and because many students enjoying acting and pretending to be someone else for a time. It also helps students to see things from the perspective of the characters. Activities such as teacher questioning of the whole class or having students answer study guide

questions are important after reading to check comprehension. Reading in class and doing comprehension activities does take up a good bit of time, but students must first understand what is going on in a story before they can move to higher level tasks like analysis and synthesis.

Once students have read and have an understanding of the story's events and characters they are ready to analyze what is happening in the story with regard to the themes of identity and consequences introduced at the beginning of the unit. For reasons described earlier in this essay, written journals are the primary method for this analysis. Students are asked to respond to journal questions written specifically to encourage student thought on how the book's events are exploring answers to the unit's essential questions. I will include here a few of the journal questions students are expected to answer throughout their reading.

Journal question 1 reads: Respond to each of the following quotes from Steve's journal with a paragraph of at least one hundred words. Focus your response on how the quotes relate to our essential questions on consequences and identity. "They take away your shoelaces and your belt so you can't kill your self no matter how bad it is. I guess making you live is part of the punishment." "He (Sunset) said when he gets out, he will have the word Monster tattooed on his forehead. I feel like I already have it tattooed on mine."

Journal question 2 reads: Steve says in his journal, "I'm just not a bad person. I know in my heart I am not a bad person." So it's obvious he believes part of his identity is that he is a good person, yet he is on trial for murder, he's in prison

surrounded by hundreds of criminals, and many people think he is a Monster. What is the effect on Steve, and what is the effect on his identity, of these things challenging his identity?

Journal question 3 reads: Steve writes in his journal on page 154-155, "I think I understand why there are so many fights. In here all you have going for you is the little surface stuff, how people look at you and what they say. And if that's all you have, then you have to protect that. Maybe that's right." The prisoners are willing to stand up and protect little surface things because that's all they have. What are things in your life you care so much about that you would defend and protect them?

Journal question 4 reads: It's clear from the beginning of Whirligig that Brent really wants to be considered popular at his new school. Steve from Monster also wants to fit in with people who he sees as cool. He says in one of his journals on page 130 that, "I remembered Miss O'brien saying it was her job to make me look different in the eyes of the jury, different from Bobo and Osvaldo and King. It was me...that had wanted to be tough like them." So both Steve and Brent wanted to fit in with the cool crowd-they wanted to base their identity on being popular or being tough. Question 1: What happens to each of them as a result of this desire? Question 2: If basing identity on something temporary like popularity doesn't work out in the end, what should someone base their identity on?

These questions are all intended to encourage student analysis of the identities of the books' major characters and of the effect that identity has on the way they live. While every student will come up with their own individual ideas, thoughts

will be discussed as a class to ensure students are seeing all sides of an issue. These journals mostly explored the identity theme, another activity served to explore the consequences theme. The following are the instructions for this action/consequence activity:

As you read *Whirligig*, write down actions and their consequences as they happen in the story. They can be big, important actions and their consequences, or even little actions and their consequences. For example, Brent's friend Jonathan said he forgot to pay his car insurance, so his dad took away his car, and now they have to show up at the party in a lame Chevy instead of the very cool Mazda MX-6. So the Action would be Jonathon forgot to pay his car insurance, and the consequences would be that his car was taken away for a month, and that he couldn't show up at the party in his cool car. You should have a few actions with their consequences for each chapter you read.

The goal of this activity is for students to make connections between actions and their consequences throughout a book. I believe this a serious help for many high school students, as many of them do not see connections between events, but instead view events as being isolated from one another. With this activity they are encouraged to look for causes of events and for multiple effects of single decisions/attitudes. While seeing action/consequence pairs in the life of a character is important practice, the exercise is meaningless unless the students make the connection to actions in their own lives. This connection to real life is the purpose of this next journal question:

Now that you've become good at recognizing action/consequence relationships by looking at Whirligig and Monster, it's time to apply this skill to your own life. Write five actions and five consequences that involve things you have done. They can be positive or negative actions, and they can be very significant or seemingly small events. Each action and consequence should be a sentence or two or three-as long as it takes to explain what happened.

This making of a connection to the students' lives is the most important part of the unit. Having students analyze the consequences of characters' actions and identities is an important first step toward the goal of improving the decision-making of students. But it is using their sharpened analytical skills to improve their moral critical thinking as it applies to their own life and choices that is the real goal. This attempt to make the jump from a character in a book's identity to the student's identity is the goal of the final project for the unit. The assignment for the final project is as follows:

At the end of Monster, Steve is trying to answer the question, who am I? This is a question of identity, and in our Monster final project you will be exploring that question by creating a photo montage in GarageBand. The goal is that after watching the photo montage, someone who did not know you before would have a pretty good idea of who you are, of your identity. Identity has many components, including but not limited to your family, friend group, where you are from, nationality/heritage, religion, character traits both physical (tall, muscular, thin, etc) and emotional (caring, smart, lazy, hard-working etc.). Basically, your identity, or

who you are, is tied to what you are like (character traits), what you like (your interests and passions), and what is important to you. Your goal in this photo montage is to show us who you are. The project should be 1-2 minutes in length, should contain at least 10 pictures, and should have a song, or multiple songs, that says something about your identity as a background to the pictures.

In addition to the photo montage, you also must write an explanation of your project that has two parts. The first part is a summary of what your photo montage says about your identity. Your summary and the montage itself should point out at least five different components of your identity. This summary can be a paragraph or two in length. The second part is an analysis of your identity. This part should be 2-4 paragraphs, twice as long as the first. The analysis of who you are should answer the following questions:

How will who I am and what's important to me affect the way I make decisions in life?

Who or what have been the biggest influences on my identity in either a positive or negative way and how have they influenced it?

How might my identity change in the next five years? Twenty years?

Have any parts of your identity resulted in negative consequences? And if so, what might you change to avoid those consequences in the future?

After completing the project, students will show their photo montages to the whole class. This serves as an opportunity for students to make a public declaration of who they are to their peers, thus strengthening their identity and helping them to

develop confidence in who they are. Ultimately as a teacher the significance of this project to me is not in what it is that the students say is important to them, but is that each student thinks critically about influences on their identity, and parts of their identity that may lead to problems, and parts of their identity that are mutable/parts that are more permanent. The goal is that they come to a better understanding of themselves and how they make decisions. The underlying belief is that this better understanding will lead to better decisions, and better decisions equals improved character.

Improving the character of high school English students using literature is not an easy goal to reach, but it is certainly attainable. Reaching this goal involves choosing the right literature and then guiding students' interactions with the text. This guidance involves asking the right questions to encourage growth of students' moral critical thinking as it pertains to characters in a novel. The teacher then guides the students to apply these same analytical skills to their own lives. This all takes place in a classroom community where students feel free to be honest in regards to sensitive issues that inevitably come up in discussions dealing with morality. A teacher who aims at the goal of character education must carefully plan a unit of instruction that is focused on one or two aspects of character that they wish to improve in their students. These aspects must be present throughout the work chosen, must be clearly introduced at the beginning of the unit, and must be explored thoroughly in a variety of individual, small group, and whole class activities. Reaching the goal of improving students' character may take a lot of focus

and effort from the teacher, but I truly believe those efforts will pay off for students in the long run.

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