

Dynamic Habits and Education: Intellectual and Ethical Dimensions

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In the current era of high-stakes testing and accountability, there is an increased interest in habits. The focus, however, is often on habits that are regimented and repetitive. Lists of habits that we can widely recommend and repeat across countless contexts are deemed useful because they are easily measurable and facilitate assessment.

Yet, such lists lead to an education that fails to take account of the fullness of students' intellectual gifts. The neglect of a richer form of habit not only underserves students, but also creates a profession of teaching that is marked by growing attrition as teachers find little room for creativity, dialogue, and genuine learning experiences.⁸⁹

Character education, which seeks to promote a student's ethical growth and intellectual achievement, is particularly attuned to the project of developing habits in education. Within the last ten years, there has been increased excitement about the importance of habits stemming from the work of psychologists such as Martin Seligman and Angela Duckworth.

⁸⁹ In 2003, up to 25% of beginning teachers left the teaching field before their third year, and almost 40% left the profession within the first 5 years of teaching. See Thomas M. Smith and Richard M. Ingersoll, "What Are the Effects of Induction and Mentoring on Beginning Teacher Turnover?" *American Educational Research Journal* 41, no. 3 (2004): 681-714; Mei-Lin Chang's, "An Appraisal Perspective of Teacher Burnout: Examining the Emotional Work of Teachers," *Education Psychology Review* 21, n. 3 (2009): 193-218.

This work has had a dramatic impact not only on private schools, but also on charter schools, most famously KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), as captured in Paul Tough's *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*. Duckworth herself is interested in character traits, such as grit, which she deems essential to engendering routines of success in students. Regardless, for our purposes here, we can see character traits as a kind of habit.

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Recent attention to the importance of habits in education has revived age-old debates about habit and character education. The enthusiasm for character education, however, is, as Kristján Kristjánsson writes, "a powerful, if as yet somewhat philosophically undiscerning and under-developed, movement."⁹⁰ Specifically, habits in education have been problematically understood as means to the end of an individualistic kind of success, where success is narrowly determined, competitive, and few achieve it. The renewed focus on habits has shown the need for more theoretical inquiry into these terms.

Contemporary Applications of Habits in Character Education Programs

⁹⁰ Kristján Kristjánsson, "Habituated Reason Aristotle and the Paradox of Moral Education," *Theory and Research in Education* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 101.

While attention to habits appears to be a positive development in current discussions about education, enthusiasm behind harnessing the power of habit in schools has resulted in a narrow view of academic, personal, and professional success.

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This narrowness is egotistical and untethered from community interest. The egotistical approach represents a narrow focus on the individual, as opposed to an understanding of the individual within community—a community where the success of the individual and the community itself are interwoven. Egotistical, as used here, is synonymous with self-interest, and leads to and an inward focus on personal gain.

Duckworth's work on grit exemplifies the egotistical perspective, as it is driven by the idea that we can harness habits of self-interest, such as grit.⁹¹ According to Duckworth's work, character traits like "grit" and "optimism" can be engrained to ensure individual student success.⁹² Accordingly, teachers grade students' habits of grit and optimism in character report

cards, just as they assess students' academic performance.⁹³ This regimented take on habits as ensuring academic success and personal gain is instrumental and concerning.

An improvement to the egotistical view of habits is the community view, described in Scott Seider's book *Character Compass: How Powerful School Culture Can Point Students Toward Success*. Seider critiques Seligman and Duckworth's research, pointing out how "the latest iteration of character education seeks to foster in students the qualities possessed by entrepreneurs and politicians," thereby emphasizing a character education for, as he suggests, personal gain.⁹⁴

Similarly, Jeffrey Aaron Snyder says of the character report cards designed by the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools and Duckworth: "Bernie Madoff's character point average, for instance, would be stellar. He was, by most accounts, an extremely hard working, charming, wildly optimistic man."⁹⁵ Snyder illustrates how the egotistical view of education is geared toward mastering pre-determined habits-as-means for personal gain. Arguably, there is no moral dimension to habits like grit, optimism, and self-control as presented in Duckworth's work.

Seider seeks to remedy the problem of habits-as-means by proposing what I call a "community model." He argues that community must play a leading role in character education programs, and that schools must embrace the charge that they are part of students' moral de-

⁹¹ Duckworth defines grit as "the tenacious pursuit of a dominant superordinate goal despite setbacks." She closely links grit to self control, which she defines as "the capacity to regulate attention, emotion, and behavior in the presence of temptation" She correlates grit and self-control with "high achievers." Duckworth, Angela, Gross, James J. "Self-Control and Grit: Related but Separable Determinants of Success." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23, issue 5 (October 2014): 319.

⁹² Duckworth, Angela L. "The Significance of Self-Control." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 108, no. 7 (February 15, 2011): 2639-40.

⁹³ For more on the character report card, see Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

⁹⁴ Scott Seider, *Character Compass: How Powerful School Culture Can Point Students Toward Success* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012): 3.

⁹⁵ Aaron Jeffrey Snyder, "Teaching Kids 'Grit' is All the Rage. Here's What's Wrong With It." *New Republic*. (May 6, 2014). URL: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117615/problem-grit-kipp-and-character-based-education>.

velopment. In his view, community creates the environment in which students and teachers cultivate and develop ethical and intellectual habits.

Seider's book is the result of a two-year study during which he and a team of researchers worked with Boston Prep, Roxbury Prep, and Pacific Rim—three charter schools in the Boston area. His premises are that the community is a necessary component of a successful character education program, and that character education must encompass moral development.

All of these schools held meetings to discuss character and community, all gave awards for students with exemplary "virtue," and all assessed students on their levels of virtue—positive techniques, in Seider's view. Seider also observes that, of the three schools, Boston Prep students showed the greatest levels of integrity and empathy—as measured by surveys that the students took at the beginning and end of their academic year.⁹⁶

Boston Prep decided on a moral and intellectual program built on the five key character traits, or virtues. All incoming students first learned about the virtues during at-home visits.⁹⁷ They continued learning during a week-long orientation specifically dedicated to virtue. Every week, a student who exemplified one of the five key virtues received a W.E.B. Du Bois award. Students also attended ethics classes throughout the year.

Teachers, however, worried that the students heard the language of virtue so much that they "tuned out" and "the language of the virtue replaced genuine reflection rather than enhancing it."⁹⁸ Seider offered several examples where students read Aristotle's *Ethics* in class and examined the philosopher's views on topics

ranging from friendship to moderation. All lessons return to the five core virtues. This rigidity resulted in a narrow interpretation of classical texts in terms of the school's five virtues, thereby excluding critical reflection and the ability to develop an imaginative vocabulary to address ethical dilemmas.

Upon closer inspection, we begin to see that the community model's portrayal of habits is reminiscent of the fixed and instrumental habits found in the egotistical view, namely, the problem of habits-as-means. The five virtues at Boston Prep—courage, compassion, integrity, perseverance, and respect—received superficial treatment, and success became equated with a set number of outcomes that individuals might attain. The schools involved the whole community in the project of ingraining a set of predetermined and fixed habits in students that ultimately were removed for the dynamic and shifting reality of daily life and learning.

Taken to the extreme, behind the façade of character education and community is a culture that still retains the egotistical aims of success for its own sake, without reflective, intelligent, and ethical practices. Virtue remained problematically inflexible. Students were rewarded for virtue—where virtue had strict parameters. Thus, when supporting the values of a community and the shared benefit of the group, the school relied on fixed views of ethical habits, falling into troubles similar to those of the egotistical view. What emerged was a hollow notion of a community that did not fully support a diverse group of learners in the necessarily fluctuating demands of living and learning.

My concern is that in both Duckworth's and Seider's view of habits there is an emphasis on the "what"—what sounds like a good idea or a good program?—and less on the "how"—how do children learn? How do teachers teach? How do students and teachers engage in meaningful learning experiences in education that prepare students for professional and social lives?

⁹⁶ These surveys used a five-point Likert scale. Seider and his team used a multi-level regression model to compare and integrate across the three schools.

⁹⁷ Seider, *Character Compass*, 53.

⁹⁸ Seider, *Character Compass*, 69.

Kristjánsson has written that “the underlying concern here is obviously how making young students into walking bundles of habit can avoid stultifying their psychological powers of critical reflection at a later stage.”⁹⁹ Kristjánsson nicely summed up my own point: prescribed and rigidly applied sets of habits are not the answer.

How, then, can we come to think of habits in education in a way that supports human growth, shifting circumstances, reflection, and imagination?

Intellectual Dimensions of Dynamic Habits

Dynamic habits are habits that are constructed and reconstructed in light of changing circumstances and interactions with others. These types of habits are the backbone of a democratic society, but also essential in education. Schools, as cornerstones of the very idea of democracy—in the ideal sense—are the locus of teaching and learning the dynamic habits that can support a rich democratic life based in dialogue and growth.

The dynamism of habits comes from the enriching interdependence of our primary experience of the world and our secondary experience that reflects on that world. Dynamic habits alternate between sensitivity to immediate experience and intelligent response, where the latter is characterized by habits of reflection, observation, and thinking.

Primary experience cannot be taught. It is the *sine qua non* of our lives and is characterized by a “minimum of incidental reflection,” whereas secondary experience is the “systemic thinking” or “intentional reflection” that can be taught and that shapes our ordinary life, think-

ing, and doing with others.¹⁰⁰ Secondary and primary experience affect and inform one another. In fact, secondary experience is the *way* we make meaning of our primary experience; it is the way our experience “gains an enriched and expanded force.”¹⁰¹

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In *Human Nature and Conduct*, John Dewey went so far as to characterize habits, themselves, as arts. “Habits-as-arts”¹⁰²—in contrast with habits-as-means—signals that our habits are responsive to the aesthetics of experience. Art applied to habit means that, in the midst of our everyday lives, we are aesthetically attuned to experience—s sensitively, responsively, artfully adapting and re-adapting our habits.

To embrace the uncertainty of immediate experience is to be spontaneous. Spontaneity is an ability. It requires a cultivated sense of openness and a sensitiveness to immediate experience. Spontaneity as cultivated may sound like a paradox, yet it is the ability to draw intelligently on impulses and sense material. Where-

⁹⁹ Kristjánsson, Kristján, “Habituated Reason: Aristotle and the Paradox of Moral Education.” *Theory and Research in Education* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 102.

¹⁰⁰ Dewey, John, and Jo Ann Boydston. *The Later Works of John Dewey, Volume 1, 1925 - 1953: 1925, Experience and Nature Revised Edition (Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953)*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008: 15.

¹⁰¹ Dewey, LW1, 16.

¹⁰² John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008): 16.

as children may be naturally spontaneous, as we move into adulthood, remaining so requires practice.

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An individual who embraces spontaneity is attuned to qualitative elements of experience—they sense problems and potential. The spontaneous self, sensitive to the material of immediate experience, draws on intelligence and organizes her impulses in an effort to solve a problem in view. These last two ideas highlight the role that secondary experience plays in making immediate experience enriching. These elements of primary experience are intimately intertwined with secondary experience, characterized by intelligent decision-making, actions, and reflections.

A habit must remain open to reconstruction. Developing a habit of patience with one's students so as not to interrupt them when they are answering a question can be an example of a dynamic habit that we can form. Yet, though it may sound like an indisputably "good" habit, it must remain available to call into question again. There may be times when the teacher must give orders, make demands, interrupt, and ask no one to speak, such as in the case of an emergency, or for some other circumstantial reason.

Becoming "aware" of our habits, then, is an important first step. For being aware of our habits is clearly the backbone of a democratic society and is also essential in education. These

are the intellectual dimensions of dynamic habits.

Ethical Dimensions of Dynamic Habits

In a shared life, which by definition is moral, reconstruction and modification of habits is a moral project. Habits of reflection, observation, thinking, and deliberation begin the modification and renewal process of habits. This process is both flexible and imaginative. Dewey writes, however, that all our actions, even the mundane ones, need not come "under moral scrutiny."¹⁰³ To know when to subject acts to moral scrutiny is part of moral activity. We learn to identify when ethical questions are at stake. On the other hand, ethical questions and activities are present in the classroom by dint of the socially shared aspect of the classroom space. That is, both in the classroom and outside of it, our lives are social, and so, imbued with ethical potential.

Dewey sees self-cultivation as a non-egotistical way of understanding ethics, where egoism is the cultivation of interests irrespective of others. Self-cultivation, as taken here, is done in light of the interest of others and the events outside oneself. Self-cultivation, moreover, is set-up against selflessness, where actions are done irrespective of the needs of one's self. That is, ethics demands of us deliberation and reflection because we are not, if we are to act ethically, forcefully plowing our way through the world without regard for either ourselves or others.

Despite changing circumstances, we tend to fall into "accustomed grooves" of behavior that are familiar, comforting, and (many times) necessary routines of our lives. Culturally, ways of perceiving ourselves become tracks, ways of acting and thinking we habitually rely on.

¹⁰³Dewey, MW14, 32.

Dewey's moral self is a self that breaks from wrongly imposed societal norms into enriched interactions with others. The moral self is one balancing between self and interaction with an other or object, in an environment; it is one that is not self-interested or instrumental, but rather has an interest in learning from the rich variety of experience, or in Dewey's words, from "all the contacts of life."¹⁰⁴ Self-cultivation and outward interest, as Dewey makes clear, are the ethical foundation of the shared life and, in his view, of education and democracy.

And these habits, to remain intelligent and ethical, must be flexible and responsive—that is, dynamic.

The practice of inward cultivation fused with outward interest is a practice that defines teaching. Teaching requires an openness to the lessons of experience, and in this case, an awareness of the particular: the particular self (teacher) and the particular other (student). Cultivating such habits is not easy. In fact, the task I describe may very well increase the challenges of teaching.

Bringing the Intellectual and the Ethical Dimensions Together

A great part of teaching is routine and determined by culture, tradition, policy mandates and standards, even amidst the variability of students, classrooms, and teachers. As such, there are many habits teachers take for granted, and necessarily so; but there are times when a teacher's habits are called into question, they are no longer quite right, or, in a new context, they no longer serve a purpose or meet the outcome a teacher has imagined.

¹⁰⁴ Dewey, John *Democracy and Education* (1916), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008): 370. And David Hansen elucidates this idea in detail in "Dewey's Book of the Moral Self," *John Dewey and Our Educational Prospect* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

Minor shifts are always underway as teachers notice, think, and reflect. In such situations, teachers enact new and modified habits. A beginning teacher, under the pressure of time, may constantly interrupt students in order to move the lesson forward. Such a teacher may, in turn, notice the lowered morale and levels of engagement. As a response, after reflecting on the situation, he may seek to develop a habit of patience and a habit of modeling answers to questions.

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Once we understand that habits are grounded in critical reflection, we begin to understand why the virtue commendations and the method of learning about friendship at Boston Prep fall flat for teachers—and why these teachers sense the curriculum is somewhat forced.

To see the two aims of ethical and intellectual as separate in education is an untenable premise for cultivating the moral life. For as Robert Boostrum writes,

Dewey argues that "the school must itself be a community life in all which that implies," and part of what that implies is that we keep in mind that the "moral and the social quality of conduct are, in the last analysis, identical with each other." The moral is not something to be added to the other elements and demands of schooling, not another course or program in the curriculum. Education—"Discipline, culture,

social efficiency, personal refinement, improvement of character”—is moral life.”¹⁰⁵

Therefore, we must see that there are important limitations to the view that morals can only be learned if explicitly taught through “direct moral instruction.”¹⁰⁶

A true project of character education in school would infuse all the work of teaching and learning together. Moral lessons would not be isolated or called out as a separate area of study.

Educators who look at “school programmes, the school courses of study, and do not find any place set apart for instruction in ethics or the ‘moral teaching’ [and] assert that the schools are doing nothing, or next to nothing, for character-training” are wrong in their criticism, wrote Dewey.¹⁰⁷ These educators have failed to understand how children learn ethical habits. They treat morals as something separate, drawn upon at certain times, in certain situations. The fixed view of virtue fails to recognize the confluence of considerations confronting the individual.

A true project of character education in school would infuse all the work of teaching and learning together. Moral lessons would not be isolated or called out as a separate area of study. I believe that students and teachers need this different framework, a different philosophy of habits—namely, a dynamic view of habits—in recognition of the dynamic reality of shared

experience that is the basis for teaching and learning. This is a richer theory of habit for education.

In seeking to understand dynamic habits, it is important that we do not create a rigidly prescriptive list—a new set of ten-best-practices-every-teacher-must-follow. While teachers must aim to improve their practice and the learning of their students, the answer is not found in creating new lists, ones that we thoughtlessly repeat: for example, stating “every morning I will start my class with fifteen minutes of reflective writing.”

For the risk is, as Dewey wrote, that “an educational enterprise [might] end merely in substituting one rigidity for another.”¹⁰⁸ Rather than turn to a new set of rigid tracks purportedly aimed at success, we can continue to cultivate “flexibly responsive”¹⁰⁹ routes, ones formed intelligently and reflectively. Cultivating dynamic habits can constitute a reliable way for teachers to enact in practice their philosophies of education.

Conclusion

Dynamic habits are necessary for a shared life, and especially for the shared activity of education that prepares us for such a life. Yet, cultivating such habits in our accountability-driven era has been pushed to the side—or even deemed detrimental to educational efforts. The picture I have painted here is one that is resistant to classrooms driven by high-stakes testing—where lessons are scripted, teachers operate in fear of saying the wrong word, and students are monitored. Conditions where the positive intellectual and ethical dimensions of schooling are stripped away foster teacher burnout.

¹⁰⁵ Boostrom, Robert, “The Peculiar Status of Democracy and Education.” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* (2014): 11.

¹⁰⁶ Dewey, John, and Jo Ann Boydston. *The Middle Works, 1899-1924. Volume 4: 1907-1909. Essays, Moral Principles in Education*: 269.

¹⁰⁷ Dewey, MW4, 269.

¹⁰⁸ Dewey, MW14, 91.

¹⁰⁹ Dewey, MW14, 91.

Dewey asked: “who shall conduct education so that humanity may improve?”¹¹⁰

The answer, as I see it, begins with thinking about the development of dynamic habits that are, all at once, intellectual and ethical. A robust understanding of habits can humanize education in fundamental ways that our current system has failed to take seriously.

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¹¹⁰ Dewey, MW9, 101.