Integrating Character Education in Our Curricula
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Introduction
This year I moved from my home country of Ecuador to the United States to teach Geography in the Spanish Immersion program at Gunston Middle School in Arlington. I came with the Visiting International Faculty program, envisioning a new and different teaching experience. Instead I encountered a similar mind set in Virginia. One day in class we were talking about government corruption and the importance of honesty in a society. One of my 8th graders said that honesty is indeed a "good" value, but it doesn't take you anywhere in life. "Honest people don't succeed in the real world. Sneaky people do."

What is going on? What has happened to the societal value structure? Something is wrong when teenagers seem to think that the whole purpose of economics is to become rich and that honesty is a concept that has no connection to the real world. Aren't justice and honesty values that we as responsible citizens should uphold in order to live in a peaceful and just society?

Background
Knowledge is defined by some people as merely knowing facts. But what we do with that information is a moral question. For example, knowing how to create nuclear energy is a matter of learning. Einstein went to school, became interested in chemistry, physics and biology and through hard work discovered nuclear energy. Now the fact that the first thing he (or the country he was working with) decided to do was to create the atomic bomb is a moral decision. The same argument can be made for Hitler's actions. Hitler could have been a very "intelligent," "knowledgeable" man but he was, by no means, ethical -- and if this point is under any kind of debate ask any of the survivors of a Nazi concentration camp.

The main reason I became a teacher was to be an agent of change. As a social studies teacher, I have been in a position to help students acquire the skills that they will need to be competitive in this demanding world, while at the same time helping them become contributing members of society. I began my career teaching economics in a multicultural school in Quito, Ecuador. The first week of class I asked my students why they decided to take economics. I was shocked by their responses. I was expecting students to tell me that economics was important because it involved issues that affected society, development, and political stability. I hoped that students would think about concepts such as equity, standards of living, justice and peace. Instead, most of them said that they were taking the class because they wanted to be rich.
Objective for this Project

What is the purpose of education? The purpose of education is to provide children with academic skills intertwined with an understanding of the value of ethics so they can be positive agents of change in society. Education is an integrative process that is concerned with the development of both knowledge and values so that children can bridge the gap between the thinking/feeling sphere and the acting realm.

Yet lately schools have become so afraid that character education can be mistaken for religion indoctrination that we have forgotten about ethics as an important formative element (ASCD report, 1997). The increasing ethnic and social diversity of our classroom should not dissuade us against addressing ethics in our classes. On the contrary, the different cultural backgrounds of our students should encourage us to include character education in our curricula as a means to find common grounds amongst our students. It is time to begin developing curriculum that provides our multicultural youth with the tools to transpose knowledge and universal values into actions. This short paper will address my personal journey to this realization and share how I have integrated character education into my curriculum.

Method

The Character Education Partnership (CEP) defines character as understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values such as respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness and caring. Developing character in this comprehensive sense requires a comprehensive educational approach- one that uses all aspects of schooling (academic subject matter, the instructional process, the management of the school environment) as opportunities for character development (CEP, 1997).

The toughest challenge, I believe, I face as a teacher is how to prepare my students to use their knowledge ethically. To be an effective teacher I cannot just concentrate on the academic aspects of education. I need to make sure that I am also influencing a positive student value structure (Shalps, 1997, Coles, 1997). What is the point of teaching students about the crimes committed by the Spanish Conquistadors or about the Holocaust if at the same time I do not instill the ethical connotations of these historical events? What is the importance of teaching students about equity distributions or the Lorenz curve in economics if I do not at the same time teach students to use this knowledge taking ethics into consideration? What is the point of teaching students to be great academicians if at the same time I can't teach students such qualities as "concern for other people, helpfulness and consideration, generosity, understanding of others, and a concern for balancing one's own needs and rights with those of others" (Shalps, 1997)?

With these thoughts in mind, the following unit plan outlines how I attempted to approach character education in one unit on world geography.
**UNIT FOCUS:** Spanish Conquest of Latin America (1492-1580)  
**GRADE:** 8th Grade  
**SUBJECT:** History (with emphasis on political economy and character education)  
**UNIT DURATION:** 2 weeks.

I. PREREQUISITE KNOWLEDGE
Students have already studied about pre-colonial America. They know that before the Spanish arrived to the Americas there already existed very old and complex civilizations such as the Mayas, Aztecs and Incas. Students also know about the effects that the Middle Ages had in Europe.

II. RATIONALE
The objective of studying Historical Geography is twofold. On the one hand, students should study it to understand why and how events happen. This knowledge then should be used to comprehend the present. On the other hand, history should serve as an ethical catalyst. Why study about the past if we don't learn from its mistakes and accomplishments? Why study history if it is not used to create a better future?

In this unit specifically, students should learn about the historical data of the conquest while learning that respect and justice are two essential values that should be upheld regardless of the time period or the circumstances.

III. OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

A. GOALS
On the one hand, by the end of the unit students should have an understanding of the social, political, economic and cultural implications of the Spanish Conquest. On the other hand, students should comprehend the importance of understanding difference among people as a mechanism to achieve an egalitarian and just society.

B. OBJECTIVES
1. Understand the international dynamics of the period.  
2. Understand the situation in Europe at the time of the Conquest (especially Spain).  
3. Understand the situation in America at the time of the Conquest (especially in South America).  
4. Understand social, political and economic reasons for misunderstanding between Spaniards and Indigenous people.  
5. Understand social, political and economic results of the misunderstanding between Spaniards and Indigenous people.  
6. Understand the importance of "showing a generous understanding of all people" as basis for an egalitarian and just society.  
7. Understand the concept of justice.
IV. TOPICS
1. Presentation of Unit.
2. Europe at the time of the Conquest.
3. Spain at the time of the Conquest.
4. America at the time of the Conquest.
5. The Inca Empire.
6. The Civil War in the Inca Empire.
7. The Encounter.
8. Methods of Control use by Spaniards.
10. Results of Conquest.
11. 1492: The encounter of two cultures or an era of genocide?

V. INSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES
A. Presentation of Unit. Method: Lecture and Questioning. Explanation of what the unit is about and why we are studying it. Why do we study past events? What do we attempt to accomplish by the end of the unit. Special attention will be placed on the ethical part of the curriculum.

B. Historical Background. Method: Cooperative Learning.
   1. Students will be divided into five groups of four.
   2. Team works on material that has been broken down into sections.
   3. Each team member reads an assigned section:
      a. Europe at the time of the Conquest
      b. Spain at the time of the Conquest
      c. America at the time of the Conquest
      d. The Inca Empire
      e. The Civil War in the Inca Empire
   4. Members of different teams who studied the same sections meet in expert groups to discuss section. Special attention will be place on understanding the similarities and the difference in the realities of Europeans and Americans.
   5. Students return to their own teams and take turns teaching other members of the team about respective sections. Same emphasis as above.
   6. Each team produces a single report. The report should address both the factual understanding of the period and the human reality from which Spaniards and Indigenous people where coming from before the time of the encounter.

C. The Encounter. Method: Inquiry. Students will read primary sources of the time. They will analyze the texts. What are the stereotypes of the Indigenous people presented in the *Cronicas*? (legal documents written by the conquerors to tell the Spanish Crown about the "New World")

D. Methods of Control used by Spaniards. Method: Inquiry. Students will read primary sources of the time. Through the Analysis of more *Cronicas*, students will analyze how the misconception that the Spaniards had about Indigenous people
resulted in cruel and inhumane political, social and economic methods of organization in the Colonies.

E. Misunderstanding of the Encounter/ Results of the Conquest. Method: Concept Attainment Lesson. Using information learned during this unit, students will define what is justice. Did the Spanish establish a just society in the Americas? What do we need to change in our society in order for it to be just?

F. 1492: The encounter of two cultures or an era of genocide? Method: Debate. Students will be broken up into two teams. One team will defend the Spanish view of Indigenous people and justify the unjust societal, political and economical structure created in the colonial period. The other team will defend the Indigenous peoples’ rights. They will argue in favor of a "generous understanding of all people" as a fair way to establish a society. Both stances will be based on primary source reading of the period (Sepulpeda vs. De Las Casas).

VI. EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

A. Informal Evaluation. Observation of students within whole class and small group discussions. Also, observation of students during the debate. Special attention will be placed on the thinking process of students.

B. Formal Evaluation. Pre/Post position paper. At the beginning of the Unit students will be asked to write a paper about their views on the Indigenous culture and the societal, political and economical structure of present day Ecuador. At the end of the Unit students have to write an evaluation of their essay. After studying about Indigenous and Spanish reality at the time of the conquest and analyzing the importance of "Justice" and of "Showing a generous understanding of all people," have their views changed? Why or why not?

C. Assessment.

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Weight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Work and Participation</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unit paper (Pre/post position Paper)</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<td>Unit test</td>
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Discussion

Overall the implementation of this unit was a success. Students were engaged in class discussions. They learned new material and skills and thought about universal values in a fun way. First of all, they learned about the Spanish Conquest. They also learned that argumentation, supporting a stand with factual information and challenging your own view on the subject, is a very important skill to master. Finally, students learned that through the matured negotiation of their differences they may be able to reaffirm or change their stance on any issue. Students had to move away from the
Conclusion

Every individual should strive to enhance his or her practical, moral and intellectual well being. But what is the importance of achieving this harmony on a community level? What is the role that education has on the development of society as a whole? Society is made up of individuals. Therefore, no society can be better than the individuals that form it. To reach a higher level of reasoning and be a contributing member of society, human beings have to be disciplined, group oriented, and have autonomy and determination. Now how can these be achieved? First of all, by learning from observation, experience and inquiry. Secondly, by being flexible and adaptive to community needs. Finally, by acting upon our ideas and creating a constancy between what we want from society and what we are willing to give back to it. In order for a society to succeed it needs individuals that are willing to act upon their freedom with responsibility and work for their community. Complete education is one that allows the perfect trade off between personal and societal needs (Durkeim, 1961).

American society is rapidly becoming more diverse. So are our classrooms. This constant change is a reality that education needs to address in order to serve its purpose. It is time to bring character education back as part of our school curriculum. We shouldn’t be afraid of addressing ethical issues. On the contrary, we need to be able to openly talk about ethics in our multicultural classrooms to find common grounds among our students. If universal values such as justice and honesty are not reinforced everyday then we are doomed to fail as a society.

References

Advice from CEP (Character Education Partnership): How to Start a Character Education Program. (Fall 1997). Reader: CT 522, Character and Ethics Education. Boston University School of Education.

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