THE VIRTUES OF UNCERTAINTY:
A CHARACTER CURRICULUM FOR THE LEARNING AGE

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We seem to live in a morally bashful age. Perish the thought that anyone might try to 'impose their values' on anyone else. Education colludes with this squeamishness by pretending that the only serious questions it faces are technical ones. How are we going to raise standards? What are the most appropriate methods for testing students, and when, and how much? Should we have 14-16 diplomas, or a six-term year? But words like 'standards' and 'appropriate' merely finesse the underlying moral questions. They have only the appearance of neutrality, for we have just to ask 'Standards of what?' and the key assumption that 'standards' refer, self-evidently, to performance on national tests, is exposed.

If, after 100 years of educational reform, half of all young people still don't get a clutch of good GCSEs; if millions of school-leavers still can't read well; if thousands of students vote with their feet every day – it is not because they are inherently lazy or stupid. It is because they can see no value in what school is offering. If we do not have the courage to surface and tackle the fundamental question of the moral purpose of education, only more expensive and ineffective tinkering will ensue.

The real moral heart of education has always involved principled decisions about character. What kinds of adults does a nation want its children to become? Not just with what skills, but with what dispositions and interests and concerns, do we want them to grow up? And deciding that means daring to value some traits over others. Dropping or retaining Shakespeare is not the point. The real question is, do we drop 'neatness' in favour of 'discerning consumption of internet-based information', and are we going to favour 'resilience' over 'honour'?

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, they didn't pussy-foot around. The English public schools talked happily of developing leadership qualities such as team spirit, fair play, judgement and rationality. While the destined-to-be-led were trained in the reciprocal attitudes of obedience, punctuality, precision, honesty, neatness and hygiene. Nowadays, quite rightly, we no longer want to be associated with a school system that sorted children so divisively into 'leaders' and 'followers', so we have

become nervous about talking about character-formation at all. But the problem was not in talking about character *per se*. It was only the *particular* sets of valued characteristics that needed challenging and updating, and we should not have thrown out the baby of moral choices about desirable characteristics with the bathwater of colonial patriarchy and inherited privilege.

Actually, there are signs of a resurgence of interest in character. Countries round the world have recently been busy drawing up wish-lists of the kinds of qualities they would like education to develop in young people. From Australia's 'new basics' (Queensland) and 'essential learnings' (Victoria, Tasmania) to the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's 'Curriculum for the Future' and the Royal Society of Arts' 'key competencies', education policy documents are now buzzing with fine-sounding adjectival phrases like 'respects the environment' and 'plays an active role in the community'.

These are a good start towards something the kinds of debate we need about the purpose of education. But for now, they seem more like fond hopes than well worked out guidelines for a revitalised education. They are often phrased so vaguely that no-one could possibly disagree – but at the unacceptable cost of no-one knowing what they really mean. Does 'respecting the environment' mean lobbying the G8, or merely not dropping litter? And the gulf between these fine sentiments and the daily reality of life in lessons remains, for many students, huge. Schools may pay lip-service to such moral choices on the first page of the prospectus, but by the time you get to the curriculum they have, all too often, disappeared.

Maybe education could learn from another area where values have recently made a comeback – the 'positive psychology' movement inspired in 1998 by American Professor Martin Seligman. Fed up with the fact that psychology had a vast vocabulary for describing pathology, but very little to say about well-being and happiness, he and colleague Chris Peterson trawled the world's literature for a preliminary list of 'character strengths and virtues'. Some apparently timeless ones kept recurring, like integrity, generosity and forgiveness. Others, however, seemed to be particularly suitable to certain kinds or conditions of society, like 'physical valour' or 'aesthetic sensibility'. Given that we too would like our kids to grow up kind and honest, what then are the special virtues that 21st century living seem to require?

It is a cliché that we live in times of escalating uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, choice and individual responsibility. Through the electronic media children are bombarded daily with conflicting models of what to value and how to live, while their communities often offer little clear guidance about how to choose wisely – or little they are willing to heed. It is also increasingly obvious that young people (especially in the UK, according to the recent Unesco report) are not coping well with this freedom and diversity. Classic symptoms of stress are high – escapism, recklessness, drug abuse, anxiety, depression, self-harm. If stress reflects a widening gap between the demands of one's life and the resources one

has to cope, clearly many young people are feeling badly under-resourced.

Those resources are psychological, as much as they are material or social. As the core function of education is precisely to develop in young people the mental and emotional resources they will need, to cope well with the real demands of their real lives, it is clearly not doing its job. And one of the reasons it is floundering is because it has no clear understanding of what the virtues are; no agreed vocabulary for talking about the tolerances, interests and habits of mind that are the bare necessities, if students are to flourish in the midst of uncertainty. It is impossible to 'improve' the running of schools unless we have a clear idea of what those virtues are. 'Where to' and 'why' have to come before 'how' and 'what'. Without that clarity, all innovation falls back obsessively on 'raising standards' as traditionally, and inadequately, defined. The requisite discussion about values and character, and how these moral choices feed through into the 'feel' of a lesson on simultaneous equations on a murky Thursday afternoon, is what has been grievously lacking so far.

So in the spirit of positive psychology, let me offer for debate a set of Character Strengths and Virtues for the Learning Age. I propose eight, that I call 'The Big 8'. They are: curiosity, courage, exploration, experimentation, imagination, reasoning, sociability and reflection. Each of these, in turn, comprises a number of sub-dispositions that I shall illustrate briefly.

Curiosity is the starting point for learning. If you are not interested in things that are difficult or puzzling, you won't engage. Curious people have a sense of wonder. They wonder about how things come to be, and how they work. They know how to ask good, pertinent, penetrating questions. They can be challenging. They have a healthy skepticism about what they are told.

Young people surely need *courage*; not necessarily physical valour but the courage to engage with uncertainty, 'to boldly go' where they are not yet sure how to respond. They need to be up for a challenge, willing to take a risk and see what happens. Courageous learners have the determination to stick with things that are hard. (Though it is also a virtue to know when to quit, not because you are feeling stupid but because it really isn't worth it.) They can be patient and persistent.

Exploration is the active, inquisitive counterpart of curiosity. Inquisitive people are good at seeking and gathering information. They can attend carefully to situations, taking their time and not jumping to conclusions or producing slick answers just to 'look good'. They enjoy the process of finding things out, of researching (whether it be footballers' lives or particle physics). They like sifting and evaluation 'evidence', and their exploration usually breeds more questions.

Experimentation is the virtue of the practical inventor. Experimenters like looking for small improvements. They don't have to have a grand, ostensibly foolproof, scheme before they try something out; they are at

home with trial and error. They are happy practising, putting in the time and effort to pick out the hard parts and master them. They enjoy drafting and re-drafting, looking at what they've produced – a garden bed, an outfit, an essay – and thinking about how they could improve it. They don't mind making mistakes - learning matters to them more than being 'right'.

Imagination is the virtue of fantasy, of using the inner world as a test-bed for ideas and a theatre of possibilities. Good imaginers have the virtue of dreaminess: they know when and how to make use of reverie, how to let ideas 'come to them'. But they also have a healthy skepticism toward their own hunches, intuitions and 'feelings of rightness' (even if they can't justify them yet). They like finding links and making connections inside their own minds, and they use imagery and metaphor in their thinking.

The creativity of imagination needs to be yoked to the virtue of *reasoning*; of being able to think carefully, rigorously and methodically, as well as to take the imaginative leap. The ability to follow a rigorous train of thought, and to spot the holes in someone else's argument, as well as your own, is invaluable. Disciplined learners can create plans and forms of structure and organisation that support their learning but can also stay open to serendipity, and throw away the plan if needs be. Discipline enables knowledge and skill to be used to guide learning, to allow the painstaking 'crafting' of things that usually needs to follow an initial 'brainwave'.

The virtue of *sociability*, and of judiciously balancing sociability with solitariness, also seems essential. Effective learners seem to know who to talk to (and who not), and when to talk (and when to keep silent) about their own learning. And they are good members of groups of explorers. They have the knack of being able to give their views and hold their own in debate, and at the same time stay open-minded. They can give feedback and suggestions skilfully and receive them graciously. They are keen to pick up useful perspectives and strategies from others.

Finally there is the virtue of *reflection*. Reflectors take time to mull things over, take stock, consider alternative strategies and possibilities. Reflective learners can take a step back every so often and question their own priorities and assumptions. They somehow know the strategic moments when this useful (and are not seduced by the current fad for 'metacognition' which seems to make the mistake of supposing that 'thinking about your own thinking' is always a good thing, which it isn't).

One of the benefits of this list, as I have tried to construct it, is that the virtues seem broad enough to apply to a good deal of out-of-school learning. Dealing with the real-time uncertainties of modern life, and developing one's own passionate interests and vocations, is usually not at all like school. The carefully planned, pre-digested, sequenced and graded kinds of bite-size learning in which conventional schooling trades are not the kinds of learning for which young people need to be prepared, and an apprenticeship in exam-passing leaves even the most successful with a skill for which there is little call, once they have left university. So we

need to focus on developing qualities of mind that do have real-life currency, and the first step is to talk about what they are.

The second step, of course, is to design schools that offer an effective, systematic apprenticeship in those qualities and virtues. How do you teach courage, or inquisitiveness, or sociability? The first stage of Step 2 is to realise what doesn't work, and not do it. What doesn't work is stand-alone lessons on those virtues. Being able to talk *about* thinking is not the same thing as being a better thinker, and it may not even be necessary. (I have watched lessons in which youngsters have been parroting back Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences, without any evidence of them becoming more multiply intelligent.) And even being coached in the abilities of 'questioning' or 'self-evaluation', for example, and being able to demonstrate the benefits when asked, is very far from having those abilities become part of one's learning *modus operandi* in everyday life.

What is needed are schools that do three things. First, they use the language of the learning virtues all the time. They find multiple ways to notice and acknowledge students' 'virtuous' development. Second, they create frequent, genuine, attractive opportunities for students to discover for themselves not just the power of these virtues but their pleasures. That means creating sizeable chunks of time where they can, both alone and in collaboration, get their teeth into real hard learning challenges that engage and intrigue them. And that means trusting young people more. And finally, the school and all the adults in it need to model the virtues in their own professional lives. Headteachers need to let the students know that they does not have all the answers, and that the school as a whole is being curious, inquisitive and exploratory about its own operation, making its way imaginatively, thoughtfully and courageously towards improvement. And every teacher, governor and midday helper should be actively looking for and welcoming opportunities to display their own learning character and virtues.

None of these three requirements is impossible. None of them need jeopardise hard won levels of control or of examination results. None of them means – God forbid – that we all have to chuck out Shakespeare and start doing a new subject called 'the learning virtues'. What it does mean, as a first step, is that we all start thinking and talking about young people and their development in a different way. What I've tried to offer here is a first draft of a 'primer' for that conversation.