

# Why schools should not grade character traits

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By **Valerie Strauss** October 20, 2011

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The recent attention given to the character report cards being developed in KIPP charter schools raises yet another set of important questions about the wisdom of reducing human potential to a set of measurements. The report cards, based on character strengths identified by two prominent psychology professors, purport to gauge a student's strength of character in seven areas — self-control, optimism, grit, gratitude, zest, curiosity and 'social intelligence' (sample).

The fundamental problem with this approach was best posed by sociologist William Bruce Cameron in his 1963 book "Informal Sociology :"

"Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

The quote is sometimes (erroneously, it seems) attributed to Albert Einstein. And that's probably because we tend to think of Einstein as a sensible fellow who understood the limits of quantification. I think we might add a corollary to Cameron's observation: *Going through tortuous gyrations in order to count something doesn't mean it should be counted.*

Countless studies, many documented in Daniel Pink's book *"Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us ,"* show that rewards can provide short-term encouragement to continue a behavior, but at the price of reduced intrinsic motivation over the long-term. Frequent reporting of a student's "overall score" in terms of character amounts to a short-term reward (or punishment) and does not tell us much about progress toward self-awareness and personal growth.

But, you might ask, can't the same objection be raised to academic grades?

Yes.

My primary goals in teaching are to help students develop and strengthen an intrinsic desire to learn, an appetite for challenges, and capacity to be resilient. I've found that, with many students, using grades as a major carrot and stick does little to further those aims and, in fact, can do much to harm them. Does this mean that I *never* use academic grades as a tactic to move students in a particular direction? Of course not. But when I do, I always have an "exit plan" to wean both them and me off it and back in the direction of intrinsic motivation.

## **Grading character**

I applaud a desire by schools to incorporate social-emotional learning strategies in their classes. I do so in many of my classes, and even wrote a book about them. But why corrupt the process by assigning numerical values to elements of character? We should focus on encouragement and self-reflection, and help students see how developing these qualities are in their short *and* long-term self interest.

If you start grading them, then intentionally or unintentionally, you are making the grade the primary reason why these traits are important. Your next step is to invent artificial performance tasks to use as grading "markers." You may not describe the tasks in this way to your students. You may say that it's all about the importance of long-term character development. But actions speak louder than words, and the grades are what count *now*.

It's so easy and more pedagogically effective to connect these qualities with students' many self-interests. Why would you want to complicate matters by creating a ratings system and developing artificial demonstrations of character strengths?

For example, it can be more engaging, effective and memorable to nurture the strength of *gratitude* by having students reflect on the assets (instead of the deficits) in their lives than it is to have them "write a letter of gratitude to a scientist who made an important discovery." It can be far more effective and memorable to connect the importance of developing self-control with a student's goal to become an Ultimate Fighter, rather than with writing about how "slaves were forced to show incredible self-control." (A KIPP study guide recommends these assignments ).

None of this means that the character strengths under discussion aren't important. We should certainly look for learning opportunities where we can reinforce these qualities. But let's make them recognizable, real, and relevant.

What is particularly alarming to me about the KIPP character report cards is that they appear to be the latest example of a trend by some school reformers to take ideas that have tremendous teaching/learning potential and then warp them so their benefits disappear and, in the worst cases, become destructive. I fear the Gates Foundation is doing this with its use of student surveys and videotaping teachers , and I fear that KIPP may be doing the same with character education.

Using student surveys and videotape to judge teachers, or using grades as a character development tool, is like using a lunar rocket in a fireworks display. It's a shame to use an instrument or an idea with such extraordinary potential for such a narrow and ultimately showy purpose.

KIPP says there are "six keys to developing character: believe it and model it....name it....find it....feel it....integrate it....praise it....". I wish it also included something about "listening for it" in the context of developing student relationships and connecting "character" to *their* hopes and dreams.

Notice that the phrase "grade it" doesn't appear on their list.

But you can be sure the kids know it's the most important "key" of all.

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