

HELPING STUDENTS TO FIND AND FRISK GOOD EXEMPLARS

STEPHAN ELLENWOOD

School of Education

Boston University

ellenwoo@bu.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper examines ways in which educators can productively help K-12 students learn how to evaluate and adapt moral exemplars. The optimal model for helping students on these important matters focuses on narrative – stories, fictive and real, that come to students regularly through careful K-12 curriculum planning. Stories provide students with opportunities to see the world through the eyes of others. Stories also help students develop two important qualities – first, enriched understanding of how broad, abstract principles and virtues work out in the complex lives of specific individuals; second, the ability and inclination to slow the pace of contemporary life that allows careful, collaborative reflections. Vital to the success of this reform is teachers steadily gaining command of the four categories in Zagzebski’s “emotion of admiration.” Additionally, Brooks highlights the powerful influences of community ethos in its “distinct moral ecology.” As teachers steadily share their growing insights of these nuanced exemplars they quickly become emboldened to enrich their classrooms by including stories, video, film, biographies and real-life characters at all grade levels and across all subject areas.

KEYWORDS

Moral exemplars, character education, narratives, education reform, learning activities

Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.
Mark Twain, *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*

In a forest as vast as philosophy, moral exemplarism has often been seen as an inconsequential branch. Even in philosophical ethics, moral exemplars have tended to play only a marginal role. “In the modern period, the primary goal of ethical theorizing has been to develop universal principles that can guide and determine right action and to resolve moral disputes.” (Peterson, et al, p.140) In the

less vast forest of education, and even in the specific area of learning theories, exemplarism also remains as a small and ignored branch. Research and theories about learning have been categorized in many ways, but in large measure they can sensibly be divided into either learning by abstract, general principles or learning by reflected experiences. These divide roughly to studying how we learn by deduction and by induction. Educational researchers, practitioners, and theorists have thoroughly examined those two learning actions in considerable detail across many decades. At the same time educators and parents have known for centuries that children and young adults learn a great deal by imitation; that is, they make mimicking others part of their behavior, their language, and their ways of thinking.

An old English saying explains that, “The example of good men is visible philosophy.” But learning by imitation, the heart of exemplarism, is only infrequently researched or analyzed largely because the process is generally understood to be simple, informal, automatic, and inevitable. Because this process is thought to be informal and individualized it became unnecessary to devote much time and energy toward it in formal classroom instruction. Because this learning process is regarded as automatic and natural, much like breathing, it additionally is seen to need no teaching. And because it is believed to be inevitable, educators often do not see it as malleable especially when compared to more urgent challenges focused on guiding abstract and experiential learning. Fortunately, several educators and philosophers recognize that there is a wide range of creative, engaging ways to help students observe, select, and adopt exemplars which significantly influence how students guide their lives. These educators, philosophers, and psychologists have clarified how the exemplarist learning process is actually far more than merely informal, inevitable and automatic. It is complex, important, reality-based, and nuanced.

Teaching and learning improve as more schools have turned more of their attention to effective ways of handling imitative learning processes. As with most learning this all occurs in different ways for each learner. And it is vital for schools seeking to re-invigorate this exemplarist learning processes that they consider creating curriculum and learning activities that are coherent across the entire K-12 schooling. Students will need consistent practice in both identifying and frisking the wide range of possible exemplars they each see in a very wide range of sources, including real life. Schools, especially in the primary and elementary levels should never limit the possible exemplars to the usual suspects – teachers, police, clergy. Even at a very young age students today live amid diverse media that are

providing them with a steady supply of potentially, positive and negative exemplars. From early on teachers can explore with students those opportunities in films, television, biographies, and fiction as well as from students' real life experiences. Some of the possibilities will be famous; others will be known only very locally; they will be adults, adolescents, and other children; and most significantly each learner's interest in them will be sparked in both obvious and unobvious ways. Good teachers recognize this as an important, complex process requiring thoughtful planning, deft spontaneity and careful guidance.

Linda Zagzebski's seminal commentary illuminating exemplarism, "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," explains thoroughly how scholars have productively refined complex moral theories which help focus opportunities for educators. Her final paragraph then identifies an excellent starting point for educators seeking to help students at any age select and evaluate their own individual moral exemplars. In that paragraph she acknowledges that "Only a tiny percentage of people in the world care about moral theory..., whereas 100% of people in the world like stories." Further along she adds "Most moral insights come from stories, but it is the special virtue of the philosopher to organize those stories." But complex, philosophical, moral theories do not convert easily to school curriculum and classrooms. To do so requires creative imagination, experience with young learners, and thoughtful planning by pedagogical leaders.

As the moral theory of exemplarism and the organization of the stories come into focus by philosophers, the corresponding duties of educators need to be carefully considered. Any school curriculum is most effective when it is coherent and consistent across all grade levels K-12 and across all subject matters. About the worst thing that can happen to any good education reform idea is for it to be given separate status in the class schedule, or at a specific grade level, or in a specific course. Any of those actions leaves all else in the school to operate in a "business as usual" mode. When all that happens the end result is that the reform idea becomes no more than a drop in the student's backpack. Moral education, and particularly exemplarist education, can be most effectively implemented across K-12 and in all subject areas through stories, literary as well as non-fiction.

One of the hallmarks of a well-educated individual is the ability to step out of our customary ways of thinking and see things afresh. Alan Gurganus explicates the power of stories, "Literature tells us that imagining the lives of others is not just a luxurious feat achieved by rare artists, but a daily necessity for all of us." (Gurganus, p.20) If the ultimate goal of sound moral education is learning how to understand, care for, and behave well with others, the foundational building block

has to be our skills and habits in getting outside of our own customary ways of thinking by thoroughly and regularly “imagining the lives of others.” To achieve that goal teachers employ all kinds of stories from all sorts of media so that their student’s moral insights about choices made by believable (fictional or not) individuals can be shared, adjusted, and adapted to create each student’s richer moral consciousness.

As the electronic-digital age continues to burst upon students, schools must constantly adjust in their determination for equipping students to evaluate stories and therefore potential exemplars from many diverse sources – e.g. fiction, biography, film, television, social media, history, real life. Despite that diversity of sources the timeless structure of a story is what still appears before the student. For generations, nearly all stories have been constructed with an introduction of the characters, a problem they face, a solution or a failed solution, and an opportunity to reflect on the overall meaning of the story. Jessamyn West wisely tells us how “fiction reveals truths that reality obscures.” Correspondingly, reality arriving in our presence so constantly, so diversely, so rapidly, and so often ephemerally prevents a thoughtful consideration of the meaning and worthiness of such experiences. This puts additional new pressure on schools to guide students as they evaluate both the behaviors and the ways of thinking each character exhibits in these rapidly unfolding electronic stories.

Key virtues of stories via any mode are how they slow down our thinking, focus our attention, and enable us to get outside our own thinking. Stories are concrete, particular and detailed. While reading stories we are able to pause, rewind, and mull over what just happened to each individual in a story. In school settings teachers encourage students to do that for every story they watch, create, or hear. Building student’s habits of slowing down, conferring with others, reflecting on context and broader meanings are all important habits in building a sophisticated exemplarist pedagogy. And this pedagogy shows us how to reach beyond our customary ways of thinking.

Zagzebski’s closer look at the process by which students identify exemplars concentrates on the “emotion of admiration.” (Zagzebski, p. 41) Effective teachers of literature recognize the power of emotion as we experience stories. They also know that we experience stories most effectively when we learn how to have our emotions inform our intellect and have our intellect influence our emotions. Coleridge’s wisdom captured in his famous phrase “the willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge, Chapter XIV) is a most valuable insight here. As we experience any art, including literature and stories from all media, he claims that

we must resist our tendency to dismiss a story as unbelievable. Instead we need to allow the entire experience to wash over us and allow emotions, including the “emotion of admiration,” to emerge. Importantly, he urges that we do so willingly; that is, we make that our thought process consciously and conscientiously. Educators need to guide students in developing that thought process. Reflexive dismissals are in fact anti-educational because that disallows new experiences essential to becoming educated. Immediately after his famous “willing suspension of disbelief” phrase Coleridge continues with “for the moment.” In doing so he is not limiting our reactions to stories, and particularly characters in a story as potential exemplars, to only the emotion of admiration. The often over-looked “for the moment” phrase suggests that the receiver of the story can also begin mulling not only the believability of the characters, but also their worthiness of our admiration. It re-activates our rational thought processes but with new perspectives. Coleridge respected, but challenged, the more casual point of view of his fellow poet, William Wordsworth, who urged that art (in the case before us, stories as art) “awakens the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom” so we “perceive the wonders of the world before us” (Coleridge, Chapter XIV); that is, the more easily believable. Coleridge was after a grander goal; he wanted us to reach past Wordsworth’s “lethargy of custom” by extending our imagination beyond merely perceiving the “wonders of the world.” This would mean that good exemplarist educators would help students explore, for example, why they are attracted to and admire a character.

Understanding how learners can handle new ideas and different kinds of people is vital for those endeavoring to reinvigorate the power of exemplars in our lives. Zagzebski enriches this endeavor, especially at the first phase of this learning – identifying possible exemplars. Her analysis of the four ways our admiration is attracted helps educators plan curriculum more precisely. She describes our attraction in one form as being virtue-centric; that is, we admire one who with remarkable regularity is kind or is generous. With skillful teaching students come to see how an individual can be ideal in one important quality, but rather imperfect in others. This is the kind of distinction helpful to students as they learn how to make their choices about their own exemplars more precisely.

We all have influential episodes in our lives. A second kind of admiration can be inspired through students observing a single act requiring a good, complex decision. This form of exemplarism can become highly influential and a kind of talisman in one’s life even though the learner knows little, or even nothing, about all else in the character’s life.

A third, and quite different, kind of admiration can be evoked by a character steadily and selflessly completing a duty on which others depend. The legendary mail delivery through “snow and sleet, rain and ice” would be a case of a student coming to admire the reliable and selfless delivery of mail, especially when it involves a story about a time-sensitive delivery with considerable benefit to the recipient. Again this example of imitable behavior can be largely independent of any knowledge about how the mail delivery person lives the rest of their life. Nonetheless, stories for students that illustrate the positive impact of consistently fulfilling one’s accepted responsibilities are an important form of exemplarism.

Zagzebski’s fourth category is what is often described as the most common perception of an admirable person serving as an ideal exemplar for young people. A good illustration of this kind of admiration would be what Jewish culture calls a *mensch*. A *mensch* personifies both noble aspirations and the skills to reach those goals in both grand and quotidian circumstances. An exemplary *mensch* consistently presents high integrity, good judgment, a caring attitude, and fundamental decency. Students experience their “emotion of adoration” as building over a period of time in which various important qualities are exhibited in literature, fiction, biography, film, or real life.

American social commentator, David Brooks, raises a fifth category of exemplars that are especially valuable for educators. He describes the influence of a community ethos on individuals. The influence cannot always be connected to one individual. Brooks distinguishes between thick and thin institutions. He argues that thick institutions have a “distinct moral ecology” that “arouses their member’s higher longings.” (Brooks, p.19) These institutions become exemplary as a collective and they soon become a foundational block in each member’s identity. Significantly for educators, Brooks noted that, “People tend to like the vision of themselves that is called forth by such places.” Thin institutions are those that we enter “instrumentally, to get a diploma or to earn a salary.” (Brooks, p.19) Thin institutions regard individuals as a part of the institution’s production. They are at best morally neutral.

In a large American high school a junior student was in a corridor behaving badly toward another student. A senior student happened by and curtailed the bad behavior through a sharp admonition, “Hey, what are you thinking? We just don’t do any of that around here.” His use of the phrase “around here” is significant because it communicates that this is more than an understanding of school rules. The look on the face of the junior student disclosed that he concluded on the spot that he had better think about his behavior then and in the

future. This was a thick institution leaving its mark on a new member. Good educators who are unafraid of learning by imitation process know the power of the African proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Hillary Clinton captured this proverb as a title of her book which is about thick institutions as exemplars.

Daniel Boorstin’s acutely intelligent 1961 book, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, argued effectively that, “Human models are more vivid and more persuasive than explicit moral demands.” (Boorstin, p.48) He opened the door to some important issues educators face in exemplarism. One of those issues requires educators to help students sharpen their distinctions among famous heroes, authentic heroes, celebrities, local heroes, negative exemplars. Schools need to help students understand all the nuanced differences between hagiographies and biographies, heroes and celebrities, grand and minor exemplars, as well as positive and negative examples. Zagzebski wisely claimed that the moral insights that come from stories can be effectively organized by philosophers. In addition to helping students sharpen the several categories of distinctions among possible exemplars, educators must steadily teach students to evaluate, or frisk, characters who are possible models for them in stories, visual media, instructional anecdotes, and biographies. Importantly, both teachers and students understand that these are all “practice games” for the student’s life-long learning so they will be able to continue productively finding and frisking exemplars throughout their lives.

Educators at any level face a broad issue about infusing exemplarism into their curriculum. In part, this has to do with the degree to which an exemplar must be saintly virtuous in all respects. Aristotle’s usual prudence may have failed him on this question. His conclusion that to be an exemplar students must be virtuous in all respects becomes actually unhelpful. To hold that standard one would either have virtually no models or would have to overlook some unvirtuous behaviors. Effective educators recognize that the issue soon becomes one of enabling students to make good judgements. Two commonly understood examples shed light on this. George Washington, widely recognized as the Father of American Democracy, made several wise decisions that established important precedents enabling the young nation to thrive. Yet, he owned slaves. Does his record as a slave-owner disqualify him as an exemplar? Most answer “No” to that question. This answer does not imply an endorsement of slavery. It does remind us that we need to be careful and modest in setting heroes. Adolf Hitler perpetrated hideously vile actions leading to unfathomable death and destruction. But he also “made the trains run on time.” Does this mean he is worthy of some positive

recognition? Of course, nearly all answer, “No.” This reminds us we need to be careful if we qualify evil. These are two rather obvious examples. Students will meet with countless less obvious positive and negative exemplars through their lives. As a result we most importantly need to help students and teachers understand that exemplarism must include caring and careful practice in making good judgements.

At the end of the 18th century Mary Wollstonecraft in her forward-looking *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* explained that we cannot “act from imitation because in every circumstance of life there is a kind of individuality which requires an exertion of judgment to modify general rules.” (Wollstonecraft, p.12) This fine counsel helps teachers enrich their students’ understanding that the key to exemplarism is how well we adjust our own actions in matters directly before us. This is a significant and complex step well beyond mere imitation or merely obeying a rule. Thus, exemplars become most helpful when students make fine distinctions about their exemplars and adjust their decisions prudently in their own contemporary lives. Michael Novak identifies the power of individual exemplars in his 1970 book *Experience and Nothingness*,

Contemporary studies in ethics, especially in Anglo American philosophical circles concentrate upon logic and language. I wish instead, to concentrate upon the drive to understand and upon the myth of symbols. My reason for doing so is that men seldom, if ever, act according to principles and rules stated in words and logically arranged. They act, rather, according to models, metaphors, stories and myths. Their action is imitative rather than rule-abiding. Prior to their intention to obey sets of rules, they are trying to become a certain type of person. (Novak, p.26)

Not all stories need to provide positive examples. Students can also learn by detecting negative examples as one clear-eyed 8th grader noted about a story, “I am not sure what I want to be yet, but I don’t want to be like Ben.” Ben was a villainous adolescent in a compelling student memoir.

There are several specific measures that educators in schools as well as in colleges and universities can take to thoroughly ground exemplarism as a responsible way of teaching and learning. At the school level it is vital that exemplarism be planfully included at all levels from kindergarten through high school. Students benefit from a consistent, coherent teaching and learning model throughout their school experience. Similarly, all good education reforms are enacted across all subject areas. Typically a reform such as exemplarism is

confined to curricular additions in history, social studies, and literature classes. This is unfortunate because rich stories of scientists, engineers, mathematicians are available, but too seldom employed by teachers. Most often science and mathematics teachers who do use such stories find students more engaged and with a richer perspective on how science, technology, engineering and mathematics evolve. These stories nearly always confirm the power of “getting outside of our own ways of thinking.”

Students at all levels benefit from keeping a journal of influential individuals, influential ideas, and influential anecdotes they come across. Effective teachers emphasize this practice, model this practice, and honor it by providing time for students to share their ideas with classmates as well as answer questions from their classmates about details about each individual. Embedded in this strategy is an understanding of the long range benefits of students taking ownership of their own learning. The process of distilling our experiences, reflecting on them, writing them down, and looking back at them some time later forms a powerful learning habit. It all rests on the key process of making precise decisions about what to include and exclude in our journals.

A classroom of students at any level can also become a research team in which they devise a plan for interviewing several adults about those whom the adults admire and precisely what it is they admire. The “researchers” then analyze the information they all collected to discern any patterns evident in their information. Similarly they could serve as “researchers” composing biographies of admirable exemplars in order to learn how they became admirable; that is, what was formative in the lives of exemplars and what specifically can students learn from this. Behind these practices again is an understanding of learning that emphasizes the learners constructing their own understanding through analysis and deliberation with others. Another important resource for this is the widely respected Giraffe Project. This project is based in Langley, Washington, USA, and focuses on honoring school-age children who create a wide range of admirable activities. It has grown now to honor those from age 8 to 108 as giraffes “who stick their neck out for the common good.” It is especially valuable because it calls students’ attention to the stories of all kinds of citizens all over the world who are not famous, but who have made sacrifices and transformed the lives of many around them. This project provides exemplars who are accessible to all learners, especially including exemplars who are the same age as the school students.

Finally, the larger percentage of teachers in a school who accept the ancient wisdom captured in the proverb, “You teach what you are,” the greater the

likelihood that a school ethos supportive of exemplarism will be created. School age students are keen observers. They easily detect and quickly reject contradictions between our words and our actions. Thus, savvy educators collaborate to do all they can to close the gap between fundamental principles we espouse and our daily interactions with colleagues and students. In doing so they are increasing the success of their students in reflecting positive exemplars and mentors.

The possibilities for successful exemplar education in schools are increased whenever colleges and universities re-allocate some of their teaching to exemplarism. Accomplishing this requires administrative and faculty leadership so that strategies for including exemplarism are grounded in learning theories and research. Integrating willing students into the planning is quite valuable in the success of such reforms. A key idea, especially at the college level, will be the faculty's willingness to guide students as they carefully select and evaluate both how and what they decide to emulate from contemporary, historical, or literary individuals. Such reforms are often resisted by appeals to the false gods of efficiency. Advocates of exemplarism often hear statements such as, "It may be a good idea, but it would take a great deal of time." Seasoned exemplarists skillfully reply, "If faculty help students construct their own idea of the kind of admirable person they seek to become, then just about any amount of time is worthy." And just as with school classrooms and subjects, potential exemplars can be presented in every university subject no matter how esoteric.

Colleges and universities also can solidify and deepen the impact of exemplarism by generating research studies about the effect of students explicitly focusing some of their education on finding and frisking exemplars. Because of the complexity of this learning experience this research would best concentrate on research designs that are longitudinal and largely qualitative. These two characteristics of any research plan need a serious commitment by an institution to establish the most important consequences of any educational effort – its durability.

In the final analysis exemplarism can be best restored if educators and scholars at every level collaborate to recognize the power of imitation as a learning process. At the same time all must accept that greater success will result by further recognizing that imitation as a learning process may be a necessary component of effective exemplarism, but it is not sufficient. The Exemplarism Gold Standard must include thoughtful reflection and careful deliberation with others in order to

make good decisions about adapting the essence of exemplars for one's personal goals and current situation.

REFERENCES

Boorstin, Daniel. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1961.

Brooks, David. "Making a Mark on People," *The Boston Globe* (newspaper), April 20, 2017.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*, 1817, Chapter XIV.

Gurganus, Alan. "Our Golden Sacrificial Couples," *Harper's* (a magazine). February, 1999.

Novak, Michael. *Experience and Nothingness*, Harper and Row, New York, 1970.

Peterson, Gregory R. et al. "The Rationality of Ultimate Concern: Moral Exemplars, Theological Ethics, and the Science of Moral Cognition," *Theology and Science*, v.8, No. 10, 2010, (p.140).

Wollstonecraft, Mary. "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," No. 12, 1792.

Zagzebski, Linda. "Exemplarist Virtue Theory," *Metaphilosophy*, v. 41, No. 1-2, January 2010.