



THE ACADEMIC JOURNAL

Philosophy, Pedagogy, and Perspectives 8.27.16

Character Scholarship Community



Welcome to our thirty-seventh edition of "The Academic Journal," a bimonthly bulletin in which you can read about MCA's educational philosophy, instructional methodology, and the various viewpoints and positions of our faculty, staff, students, and families.

Teaching – Because The Soul Matters

Part 5: Practical Application

MCA Consciously submits to transcendent truth, goodness, and beauty. How does this effect the way we adults approach character development in our students? First, we recognize that there are universal, lasting ideals outside of ourselves that are worth pursuing. Daily we remember that we, too, must pursue these ideals. Although we may be further along, we have not arrived. Secondly, we discipline... that is, we disciple. We recognize that discipline is a matter of discipleship, that discipleship is a matter of relationship, that our relationships with students are guided by our authority administered lovingly, justly, and unselfishly, that we are all on similar journeys to find our places and purposes, and that because of our current station in life, we adults have something to offer. Every opportunity for discipline is an opportunity to address the soul (the mind, the heart, and ultimately the will). We are not merely changing behavior. We are feeding the mind on truth while we are kindling the fire in the heart toward what is good. We are inspiring the soul with beauty by making truth and goodness manifest to our senses.

We place before our students stories that ignite their imaginations, problems that challenge their curiosity, and even more importantly – and scarier – we put ourselves before them as models, flawed as we are. We paint for them a clear picture of what is noble and good, and what is not. We offer them images of what might be, what could be, even what should be. We acknowledge that our students are complex human beings coming to us already endowed with worth and value, so we treat them with respect and dignity. We persuade rather than coerce. We influence rather than manipulate. We explain rather than hide behind the power of authority. We seek reasons for behaviors rather than settling for merely observable actions. We honor the student's right to choose... both what is right or what is wrong. We commend their honorable behavior and intentions. And when they choose the wrong path, we work through a process of correction and reclamation of character, which may include conferences, natural consequences, and punishments.

While student discipline is primarily the responsibility of the classroom teacher, with the entire faculty and staff serving *en loco parentis*, every member of the staff shares the responsibility for the discipline of every student anywhere in the school.

Temporarily standing in the place of parents, we instruct and set boundaries for our students – our children – and more importantly we show them through our own lives, respect, honesty, compassion, responsibility, and courage.

We call our children into adulthood. While we allow second graders to enjoy being second graders (grappling with learning to read, running around on the playground devising new games to play, and learning about westward expansion), moment by moment we are calling them to be one moment older and one moment more mature.

We lead our young upper schoolers to find their place in the world, not by following naïve, childish dreams of cheap, shallow thrills of vanity and greed but dreams full of vigor and lasting value. One of our rising ninth graders, for example, said, "I want to be a famous musician." "Famous" is the operative word, which is not surprising since we are all born inclined to love ourselves... and ourselves alone. Rather than squelching his dream, we help him order his affections. We encourage him to set his eyes on



"You cannot pass," he said. The orcs stood still, and a dead silence fell." (from *The Fellowship of the Rings*)



developing his craft for the sake of beauty and truth that he might do good in this world. Then, secondarily, those who are so drawn to his work will follow his work.

We reinforce our five expectations and ten habits through “refocusing,” a part of the Time to Teach® program. Once students have been taught and have practiced the expected behaviors, they are then held accountable for those behaviors without repeated warnings. We ask students who do not meet an expectation to complete a Refocus® sheet. Refocusing is time to reflect on behavior and to make the necessary adjustments. Refocusing is intended to stop low-level distractions, like speaking out of turn, showing up late to class, or making distracting noises. Refocusing is to guard quality, teaching time. Refocusing is not a punishment, so as soon as it feels that way, it is time to re-tool the process. Refocusing is not for serious misbehaviors. Refocusing is not a cure all.

We address persistent and more serious misbehaviors differently, sometimes following several approaches simultaneously. We can bring in parents or other colleagues, allow for natural consequences, dispense punishment, and conference with the student. We might appeal to the student’s soul through: 1) encouragement to inspire and fill him with hope and courage, 2) correction to remedy something wrong, 3) rebuke to censure behavior, to say “no,” 4) entreaty to plead with or to urge the student, 5) instruction to provide a lesson, a precept, or information that will help the student understand the world, 6) warning to inform of probable danger, and 7) teaching to impart knowledge. We can also employ logical consequences, such as removal from an activity, prohibiting attendance at future events, calling dad, uninterrupted walking during recess, asking forgiveness, making restitution, and so forth. If necessary, we can suspend the student.

There are two methods we avoid: rewards and shame. We do not want to shape behaviors by rewards, although control is an alluring siren of Skinnerian behavior modification. Do rewards motivate people? Absolutely! They motivate people to get rewards. Rewards, however, cannot make the deep, lasting change we desire because they are aimed at affecting only what we do, and not the soul. In fact, the use of rewards starves the will and trains the heart and the mind to selfishness; you do something primarily to get something. Rewards send the message that human beings are simply complex machines or more developed models of the lower animals, devoid of free will. Long term, rewards intimate a dangerous message that our behaviors are governed externally. “What you are now is where you were when” said an old Morris Massey training video. If we are victims of our surroundings, we are not ultimately responsible for our own behaviors nor can we be held accountable for them. Rewards teach that manipulation is acceptable, if not necessary. And, they distort and damage relationships, the very foundation of discipline.



We also want to avoid shaming a child. Shaming can take many forms such as sarcasm, eye rolling, calling a child out in front of her peers, and standing a child in the hallway for all to see. Shame, in whatever form it takes, is a way to control another person by publicly undermining her value to society and her deeply ingrained need for connection by threatening to disconnect. To shame a student into conformity may produce a temporary outward change, but it will also be fertile soil for bitterness, anger, aggression, retaliation, and the permission to use this nefarious power to control others for her own pleasure. Shame is guaranteed to damage a relationship and prevent healthy discipleship.

Since we all do what first we believe, behaviors are windows into the soul. It is incumbent on us, therefore, in repeating or serious cases of misbehavior to figure out why a student does what he does. If we can discern that, then we can address the belief at the core of his actions. If we can help bring about a change and encourage a love for what is truly good, then the student’s behaviors will change because his heart is now inclined to what is good. We can and must teach children the difference between vice and virtue and how to feel about them, to love what is good and to hate what is bad or evil. If we are successful we can close our eyes, turn our backs, and be completely confident of what he will do.

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