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## Inspiring Students' Moral Imagination: Mission and Process

By Richard F. Bowman

*Winona State University*

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# Inspiring Students' Moral Imagination: Mission and Process

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Whatever an educator's instructional goals, "students experience the classroom first and foremost as a social system" (Bowman 2020, 100). Life in classrooms mirrors a complex mosaic of relationships in which there are as many as a thousand teacher-student interactions a day (Jackson 1968). Teaching is not about students in the abstract. Rather, teaching is brought to life by the sensations of what one sees, hears, touches, tastes, feels, and fears. Social-impact teaching compels the moral question: Who matters? In practice, the answer reflects the circle of moral concern that educators and students hold for themselves, their school, and their community. Thoughtful educators tend to have an enlarged circle of moral concern that focuses on the *effects* of their instructional decisions on students both now and in the future. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger argued that what distinguishes human beings is the ability to take a stand on what and who we are. Teachers as moral leaders awaken learners' curiosity related to what and who we are. Other committed educators tend to think in smaller circles of moral concern including "crafting rules of conduct to guide, manage, and govern the spaces between and among students" (Bowman 2016, 100).

## II. PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to describe and illustrate four instructional practices that contribute to the development of moral imagination in academic environments: (a) Teacher as Moral Leader, (b) Self-Governing Professionalism, (c) Values-Based Student Conduct, and (d) Thinking, Communicating, Teaching, and Leading through Visual Imagery.

Author: Winona State University, MN. e-mail: rbowman@winona.edu

### a) *Mission: Teacher as Moral Leader*

A free society is ultimately a moral achievement (Sacks 2020). In a free society, a moral code mirrors a concern for the welfare of others, an enduring commitment to justice and compassion, and a mind-set focused on shifting from "I" to "We" to optimize the success of others as opposed to oneself (Gist and Mulally 2023). Moral thinking reflects the capacity to conceive of social behavior in terms of values that can be found in every culture throughout human history, tracing back to the mythic poem "Epic of Gilgamesh" which appeared in the third millennium B. C. (Joyce 2006). Morality refers to human judgment that some behaviors are right and others are wrong and that "social standards or norms exist to distinguish and guide those determinations" (Gist and Mullaney, 8). In Jonathan Sacks' (2020) *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, the author argues that the divisiveness of our times can be traced to the loss of a shared moral code that has guided society across time.

In academic environments, teacher humility drives the moral virtues of kindness, generosity, integrity, and courage. In the *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis (1943) argues that courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point. In the classroom, educator humility reveals a deep regard for the dignity of each student and a commitment to the "Greater Good." In instructional settings, self-honesty and principled courage are a necessary condition for honoring the dignity of individuals and embracing the Greater Good that is enshrined in our nation's founding documents and reinforced in the contemporary practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion. George Mason, the principal author of the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, framed the concept of the Greater Good resonantly: "America is a republic. A republic is based on the people and dedicated to the common good. If people put the common good before their own interests, the republic flourishes. If they pursue only private gain, the republic dies" (Moyers 1989).

### i. *Process: Teacher as Moral Leader*

Storytelling is one of the very few human traits that are truly universal across culture and through all of human history. In an instructional setting, an emotionally resonant story calls one to the truth of self and the humanity of others (Bowman 2018). Neuropsychologists have observed "that learning is fundamentally an emotional process" (Fabritius and Hagemann 2017,

186). In storytelling, emotion-eliciting input alters learners' brain functioning after only 12 milliseconds---far before students become consciously aware of it (Reisyan 2016). In practice, listening to classmates' personal stories for emergent threads of meaning allows students to share common experiences that contribute to the development of moral imagination. Listening to classmates' stories might, for example, elicit an ongoing, nuanced awareness of the racial narratives that students inherited in their formative years (Wilkinson 2021).

In a morally responsive classroom, the ability to tell the right story at the right time is an essential pedagogical skill (Bowman 2018). The very heart of being an educator "is the desire to tell a story by making sensory, emotional connections with students in an empathetic manner" (Schultz 2011, 273). Zulu is the largest ethnic group in South Africa. Their empathetic story speaks to what makes us human and moral. The Zulu standard greeting, *Sawubona*, is how one says hello. In the Zulu tradition, however, seeing is much more than the simple act of sight---it is the ability to see beyond sight (Rinne 2022). In daily life, *Sawubona* means I see all of you, your dignity and your humanity. I see your pride, your dreams, your fears, your agency, your vulnerability, your power and your pride. As the *Sawubona* greeting melodically rolls off one's tongue, it expresses a resonant sense of: "I see you and I value you. I accept you for what you are" (Rinne, 58). The customary response to *Sawubona* is *shiloba*: "I exist for you." More than being simply a casual greeting, *shiloba* radiates an "invitation to witness and truly, fully be in the presence of one another" (Rinne, 58). In instructional settings, the Zulu story serves as the very definition of inclusion: "A sense of belonging and agency. Being valued, seen, and respected for who we are as individuals" (Miller and Katz 2023, 47). The Zulu cultural narrative further serves as a pedagogical imperative that students want to be seen and valued and that doing so is a primary educator moral responsibility in enlarging students' circle of moral concern.

#### ii. *Moral Purpose in a School Setting: An Illustrative Instructional Activity*

There is a current crisis of faith in many of our political, economic, public health, media, and academic institutions (Kleiner 2018; Bloomberg 2022; Bowman 2023). Recent peaceful and alternately violent protests on many of our nation's collegiate campuses have forced a foundational question: To what extent are our academic institutions inspired and guided by moral purpose? A moral purpose is a value that appeals to an innate sense, held by many individuals, of what is right and worthwhile. In a campus setting, a moral purpose reveals the dynamics of human motivation and behavior. In practice, a moral purpose's effectiveness depends on its connection to the shared culture of humanity to the

extent that it draws on philosophical ideas that have stood the test of time (Mourkogiannis 2005).

Imagine a social studies teacher writing three philosophical ideas that have stood the test of time on a classroom white board: Excellence, Discovery, and Altruism. Further imagine that the classroom teacher highlights multiple examples of these distinctive moral purposes by drawing on stories from literature, history, science, and philosophy to illuminate the conceptual tools of excellence, discovery, and altruism. Finally, imagine that the classroom teacher creates a small-group discussion format in which students are invited to discuss and subsequently share examples of how their own school culture either exhibits or fails to exhibit the traits of excellence, discovery, and altruism. Before beginning the small-group activity, the teacher shares three illustrative examples of moral purpose: Medieval craftsmen's commitment to *excellence* built the great cathedrals of Europe (Sennett 2008). Leonardo da Vinci, the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Florentine polymath, made groundbreaking discoveries in optics, engineering, anatomy, geology, fluid dynamics, weaponry, and painting, highlighted in his 7,200 pages of well-preserved notes (Isaacson 2017). The scriptural parable of the Good Samaritan expresses an *altruistic* moral purpose in helping strangers as well as those that one knows.

#### iii. *Morally-Responsive Classroom: An Illustrative Learning Activity*

Imagine beginning a social studies or science class by inviting students to consider cultures that have lived sustainably sometimes for thousands of years but are currently *suffering* from the effects of people today who are polluting their environment (Spodek 2023). Imagine inviting students to further consider a statement written on the classroom whiteboard: "Living sustainably is not deprivation if we do so to alleviate the suffering of others. It's love" (Spodek, 74).

Relatedly, in a follow-up small-group discussion, one might invite students to consider what "personal actions" will be required to "live with love" to ensure clean air, land, water and food for everyone: Do I have to drive to school rather than simply walk? Should my family drive a SUV? Or fly to our family vacation destination? Or stay connected to the electric grid rather than using a portable solar kit? Or continue to use disposable diapers?

In a classroom setting, a moral leadership perspective clarifies and simplifies for students the insight that environmental problems all result from one cause: human behavior, driven by the prevailing culture and societal values. The moral implication for students is arresting: Disenfranchised people around the globe suffer from our polluting and depleting. The moral implication for educators is compelling: One inspires and leads students to live by the values you live yourself.

b) *Mission: Self-Governing Professionalism in Academic Settings*

Professionalism is holistic and authentic. The most powerful form of human influence is inspiration. Inspired professional behavior is internal, intrinsic, and sustainable (Seidman 2007). In a morally-interdependent world, professionals inspire principled performance by enlisting others in common cause by contributing one's character and creativity to how a campus pursues its mission. Much like an artist, a professional is both the vehicle and the creator of that which seeks to be born: Something greater than oneself. At its core, professionalism in academic settings revolves around reflecting deeply about what colleagues and students are doing together and how they are in *relationship with each other* as they coevolve a common future (Seidman). In the everydayness of academic life, professionalism enables a faculty to discover shared interests, to clarify its instructional intent, and strengthen its connections with colleagues (Wheatley 2005). Self-governing professional cultures invite and encourage a collective leadership orientation. For true professionals, individual egos exist only in contemplation of the whole.

i. *Process: Professionalism as a Continuous State of Becoming*

Professionalism fills the interpersonal synapses between one student and another, between one colleague and another, between one department and another, between one organization and another (Seidman 2007). In practice, professionalism provides educators the freedom to self-govern around shared values and the desire to accomplish common goals. In academic settings, educators as professionals are self-controlled and self-motivated to act in ways that enhance the capacity of students and colleagues to work collaboratively to achieve instructional outcomes. In classroom settings, educators as professionals think and communicate in the language of those ideals which matter deeply to all human beings: Integrity, truth, transparency, fairness, justice, humility, honor, and service to others (Seidman). In that sense, professionalism is less a matter of what professionals do and more a matter of who they are as moral beings (Wiersma 2010). Professionalism is not something we do. It is something we become.

Civility is one tile in the resplendent mosaic of professionalism. In practice, professionalism radiates a heightened consciousness for relating to others in principled ways. Professional educators sense their own shadows and decry the toxic effects of *incivility* in academic environments, including destructive behaviors such as gossip, condescension, angry outbursts, and collegial and programmatic sabotage. Strikingly, professionalism that is either coerced or externally motivated by systems of rewards and punishments exposes those behaviors for what they are—

unsustainable. In contrast, the impulse of true professionalism is a poetic dance, not a forced march.

ii. *Civility: An Illustrative Learning Activity*

Today, intolerance, self-indulgent anger, and vitriolic rants are destroying the civility on which democratic government depends. In our media-drenched culture, citizens and students are being relentlessly exposed to a world of raw emotions in which visceral dislike becomes hatred, anger becomes narcissistic rage, opponents become enemies, and dismay teeters on despair. It is a world where individuals hear ideologically only what they want to hear always confirmed and never contradicted (Bowman 2014).

The very soul of professionalism is the art of conversation-- the ability to create a dialogue that students and colleague will willingly join. In a small-group discussion, students might well be invited to reflect on an evocative question: "Is our country's slide into incivility neither inevitable nor unstoppable in public discourse?" (Bowman 2019) Secondly, students might be invited to consider and debate the relevance of these nine principles for renewing civility in their own classroom and in public settings:

- *Pay Attention:* Be aware and attend to the world and the people around you.
- *Listen:* Focus on others in order to better understand their points of view.
- *Be Inclusive:* Welcome all groups of citizens working for the greater good of the community.
- *Don't Gossip:* And don't accept when others choose to do so.
- *Show Respect:* Honor other people and their opinions, especially in the midst of disagreement.
- *Be Agreeable:* Look for opportunities to agree; don't contradict just to do so.
- *Apologize:* Be sincere and repair damaged relationships.
- *Give Constructive Criticism:* When disagreeing, stick to the issues and don't make a personal attack.
- *Take Responsibility:* Don't shift responsibility and blame onto others; share disagreements publicly. (Seib 2018)

Teachers as moral leaders inspire the impulse of dialogue and respectful conversation in classroom settings. It is the amplification of those impulses which creates a heightened consciousness for relating to others in principled ways that deeply-thoughtful practitioners rightly insist upon calling *teaching and learning*.

c) *Mission: Inspiring Values-Based Self-Governance in School Settings*

The ways that students "act, react, and interact are all products of distinct cognitive processes" involving the one trillion nerve cells that comprise the

human brain (Fabritius and Hagemann 2017, IX). In instructional environments, there are essentially only three ways to achieve acceptable student conduct: Coerce, motivate, and inspire (Seidman 2007). Coercive and motivational strategies rely on systems of external rewards and punishments to get students to comply with established rules. In practice, traditional rules are based on transactional relationships in which “educators and students are focused on what they can get for what they have to give” (Bowman 2016, 102). For a besieged classroom teacher, one’s initial disciplinary impulse tends to arise from a place of self-concern: “I want to change your behavior with a reward or incentive, so that, if you meet the targets or goals I set for you, this will help me meet my own needs and goals” (Secretan 2005, 14). Traditional classroom management practices subtly reinforce the view that students are the source of most of the problems in academic environments and that educators necessarily have rules to solve those problems. In practice, rules change behavior. Moreover, those who write classroom rules have real power.

The instructional implication, however, is that when students are motivated and managed extrinsically, external forces determine their emotions and behaviors. In contrast, when students are inspired, internalized core values shape students’ emotions and interactions. In traditional classrooms, power flows from individuals in positions of authority, including administrators and teachers. In self-governing classrooms, “the primary source of power flows from a set of values-inspired ideas” (Bowman 2016, 105). Values-inspired thinking signals a shift from rules-based authority to moral authority exemplified in shared governance that enables “students to become self-empowered, self-disciplined, and instructionally engaged” (Bowman, 105).

i. *Process: Inspiring Values-Based Student Conduct*

Creating a culture of self-disciplined student conduct begins with modeling for students how to manage the Self: one’s character, ethics, integrity, temperament, knowledge, words, and actions (Hock 2000). For educators, values-based stories are an untapped resource with enormous potential for inspiring values-based behavior. Storytelling is as old as humanity itself. Throughout history stories have always been about ethics: The philosophical practice of testing and retesting the consequences of one’s actions and their effect on others (Kleiner 2019). In the original mythological version that gave name to the trait, Narcissus, an emotionally detached young man is punished by Aphrodite, the goddess of love, for his refusal to love anyone. His curse to love only himself ended up causing his drowning while admiring his own reflection on a lake (Chamorro-Premuzic 2024).

In the everydayness of life, “stories express how and why life changes” (McKee 2003, 52). Storytelling in

classroom settings invites students to calibrate their inner moral compass: What do I believe in? What do I stand for? What matters? What is decency? What are the *values* that guide my daily life? What do we owe one another? (Handy 2019) In a classroom setting, an educator might ask, for example, “What is the moral of the story about Narcissus as it relates to your life?”

Values-inspired conduct is internal, intrinsic, and enduring (Pink 2009). When he was a young student in Virginia, George Washington copied a list of 110 *Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior in Company and Conversation* compiled by French Jesuit priests in 1595 and reprinted in English in 1640. The rules had such a “profound influence on Washington at age 14 that they shaped America’s first president and guided many of his decisions and actions throughout his life and presidency” (Dilenschneider 2013, 12). The 110 rules of civility addressed moral issues, but they addressed them indirectly. Contextually, the rules of civility formed the inner person by shaping the outer. In the poem “The Rainbow,” William Wordsworth observes that “the Child is Father of the Man.” Because values mirror “deep-seated beliefs about the world and how it operates,” they function as the emotional rules that govern students’ attitudes, choices, and behaviors in the classroom (Freiberg and Freiberg 1997, 146).

Thinking about shared values in the classroom is a pivotal part of linking everyday actions to the common good. As educators and students, to whom are we accountable and for what? Creating a classroom culture of values-inspired governance anchored in the common good begins with the individual student and then proceeds to the class as a whole. Doing so permits each student “to take responsibility for the whole” in which common goals override diverging personal interests (Somerville and Mills 1999, 37). Educators cannot, however, realistically introduce and simply impose core values in academic settings. As exemplified in George Washington’s life, individual students must initially be predisposed to embracing common values. While students may or may not care about or actually believe in traditional school governance, values represent things that individuals care deeply about: To betray one’s values is to betray the Self (Seidman 2007). Because values mirror an ethical connotation, they empower classmates and teachers to both honor or disavow others’ actions. For educators and students, discovering and managing the Self in classroom and school settings mirrors a “complex, unending, incredibly difficult, oft-shunned task” (Hock 2000, 22). Moreover, designing and implementing a “school governance structure grounded in values-based thinking” will likely prove to be the most challenging, engaging, and intrinsically rewarding work in one’s career (Bowman 2016, 105).

ii. *Designing Values-Based School Governance: An Illustrative Process*

Everything in the classroom is an experiment to discover what works (Wheatley 2024). Life in classrooms continuously gives educators and students feedback regarding what works and what does not work. Reflecting on experience is what keeps educators and students engaged instructionally (Dewey 1916). Admittedly, no single educator, expert, or faculty sees sufficiently to define a classroom management *best practice* for diverse instructional settings. What thoughtful, experienced educators sense contextually is that what works *there* might not work *here*, because *there* and *here* are never identical, with even small differences affecting the desired outcome. Designing and implementing a classroom management system will always be a work in progress for both educators and students. Wheatley (2024) crystallizes the challenge: "The Work: Place the work in the center and keep it there" (11).

d) *Mission: Thinking, Communicating, and Teaching through Visual Imagery*

Cave wall drawings that date back more than 44,000 years suggest that thinking and communicating in pictures existed long before written language was invented and possibly even before the spoken word (Cherches 2023). A body of research reveals that humans' evolutionary brains were wired for visual images, stories, and metaphors (Cherches). A story is a form of reflection going back centuries as a way to gain a deeper, more inclusive point of view (Simmons 2019). Metaphors create reality. They structure what we perceive, how we perceive it, and how we relate to other people (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). An ancient village, for example, serves as a metaphor and a model for an inclusive classroom. Its inhabitants had names, characters, personalities, and social positions. Nobody owned a village; nobody owns a classroom.

One of the unrelenting challenges that educators and students face is getting others to "see" what they are thinking, feeling, and saying. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* the term "mind's eye" refers to a mentally recalled visual image unable to be seen by the physical eye. To think, communicate, connect, and mentor, exemplary educators use visual imagery and visual language including pictures, metaphors, mental models, and *stories* to enhance deep learning in instructional settings. A classroom PowerPoint presentation featuring visually stimulating images, as opposed to black-and-white bullet points or text, serves to enhance student engagement, comprehension, and retention (Cherches 2023).

Recent research demonstrates that when text or numbers compete with visual images for students' attention, the images prevail. This phenomenon is known as the Picture Superiority Effect (PSE). When text

or numbers are used *in combination with* images, that combination is more effective than either on their own" (Cherches 2023, 21). This is known as Dual-Coding Theory. The instructional implication is that educators who leverage the power of visual imagery in combination with text or numbers increase the probability of student engagement. Relatedly, to enhance their effectiveness in classroom settings, educators need to be more intentional and skillful in using visual imagery and visual thinking in their quest to get students to "see" what they are saying in words and numbers.

i. *Process: Drawing on the Power of Visual Imagery to Capture Student Attention*

In instructional settings, visual imagery allows educators and students to capture ideas, amplify insights, solve problems, and inspire moral action. Leveraging the power of visual imagery, mental models, metaphor, analogy, storytelling, humor, and video supports students in retraining information and deepening moral thinking.

ii. *Morally-Responsive Classroom: An Illustrative Learning Activity*

Visual imagery often reveals multiple moral perspectives by bringing real people to life. Ethically, that changes the way that we look at those human beings and their condition. Imagine a middle-school teacher beginning a social studies class with Andy Grammar's music video, "A Call to Act against Homelessness." Against the backdrop of his latest single, "Fresh Eyes," the pop singer provided haircuts, clean clothes, meals, and kindness to individuals seeking shelter on skid row at the Union Rescue Mission in Los Angeles. Residents who only moments earlier were viewed as vulnerable, marginalized, and invisible were suddenly seen with "Fresh Eyes." For students viewing the moving video in a middle-school classroom, while encountering the cascading lyrics in "Fresh Eyes," the faces of those in the shelter serve to force a series of moral questions: "Why are you looking at me differently?" "Why am I seeing you differently?" "Is it possible for me to see past the homelessness in my midst?" "Can I get to truly know someone beyond their simply being labeled as homeless?" "Did the make-up, clean clothes, haircut, and meals, together with assuming a real-life role in the music video, create a sense of *purpose*, *meaning*, and *importance* for the those living at the shelter?" (Bowman 2018)

### III. DISCUSSION

The Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume (2000) observed that moral imagination diminishes with distance. In the uncertainty and ambiguity of their daily lives, students often feel little sense of connection or moral obligation to distant events in the world. Too often those events are

perceived as an abstraction. In today's hyperconnected, hypertransparent world, moral interdependence is inescapable. Recent advances in technology and vast networks of information have fundamentally changed expectations regarding how students should relate to others, both in the classroom and with people in very different cultures, places, and times.

Across centuries, narratives have created the "realization that all of our activities and beliefs spring from stories. Science tells a particular story, so do religions" (Wheatley 1998, 340). In sharing their personal stories with one another, learners create an interpretation of their lives, its purpose, significance, and promise. Martin Luther King was especially gifted in creating and sharing stories of a future state that was different from and better than the current reality (Cherches 2023.) In his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King dramatized the present so that "individuals could rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism." The early Christians had nothing but a profound revelatory experience. They did nothing—nothing but wander about telling a new story. Through their simple wanderings, they ignited the transformation of humanity (Swimme and Berry 1992). Profoundly, the stories of both Martin Luther King and the early Christians exhibit a piercing moral resonance for educators and students: Who is worthy of the full expression of their humanity? (Wilkinson 2021)

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The recurrent challenge confronting educators in diverse academic settings is how to inspire students to enlarge their circles of moral concern: To become more aware of themselves, more empathic towards others, more tolerant of others' opinions and beliefs, more sensitive to their ecological surroundings, more confident in responding to an ambiguous and changing future, and more willing to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion in creating collaborative solutions to societal and organizational challenges (Winkler and Pelzmann 2023). In Howard Gardner's (1995) *Leading Minds* we are reminded that it is imperative for educators to know their stories, to get them straight, to communicate them effectively, to overcome the counter-stories that they face, and to embody in their lives the stories that they share with their students in a culture of moral learning. Educators cannot teach a story without first writing and living one dedicated to awakening in learners the moral qualities of the human spirit.

In Victor Frankel's (1959) *In Search of Meaning*, the psychiatrist argues that what is important is not what we expect from life but rather what life expects from us. What life expects from educators and students is to use their words and actions is to make others' lives richer and more significant. In an academic environment, embracing a moral leadership perspective, a

commitment to professionalism, values-based governance, and visual imagery that expresses a piercing moral resonance serves to create larger circles of moral concern that affirm the dignity of others and the dignity of the work that others do.

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