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Character Building in Children's Online Information Behaviours: Applying a Virtue Epistemology Perspective to Information Literacy

David McMenemy and Steven Buchanan
Computer and Information Sciences
University of Strathclyde
Glasgow, Scotland

Aim
- Define and explore concepts of character development in the information literacy context
  - Intellectual character a topic of significant societal concern
  - Issues in online behaviours are reported globally, and range from issues of access, to use, to conduct
  - Issues include misinformation and disinformation, hate speech, cyberbullying, and inappropriate use of intellectual property
  - Understudied topic within information literacy and information science
- We introduce the classical concept of intellectual character and discuss virtue epistemology in the information literacy context

Virtue epistemology and character
- **Virtue epistemology** (VE) relates virtue (i.e. the traits of a moral person) to knowledge, and knowledge acquisition
  - VE “requires that we think, reason, judge, evaluate, read, interpret, adjudicate, search, or reflect in various ways” with attention to aspects of personal and intellectual character (Baehr, 2011, p.18)
- **Character** is understood as “the comprehensive set of ethical and intellectual dispositions of a person” (Meyer, 2015)
  - Intellectual character is the part of your character—that pertains to thinking and learning” (Baehr, 2015, p.2)

"Virtues are not formed in us by nature, but they result from our natural capacity to acquire them when that capacity has been developed by training" (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics Book 1, Chapter 2).
Research questions

1. What are the desirable intellectual character traits applicable to children’s online information behaviours?
2. How is the development of desirable intellectual character traits currently addressed within information literacy education?

Methodology

- Used nine core intellectual virtues identified by Baehr (2015) as conceptual framework
- Applied these virtues to two core information literacy models, the Big6, and the ACRL Framework
- Used content analysis as method for identification of presence of virtues
- Approach involved identifying both manifest (exact or close matches/synonymous terms) and latent (expressed differently but with shared meaning) presence

Baehr’s nine core virtues *

- **Curiosity** – relates to being “driven to explore and expand their mind” (p.94). Motivated by a desire for genuine, and broad, understanding.
- **Intellectual autonomy** – describes “a willingness and ability to think for oneself” (p.70).
- **Intellectual humility** – refers to “an alertness to and willingness to “own” one’s intellectual limitations, weaknesses, and mistakes” (p.81)

*References to Baehr (2015)
Baehr’s nine core virtues (2)

- **Attentiveness** – relates to the individual being “present in the sense that she’s personally engaged and invested in what’s being said or learned” (p.94).
- **Intellectual carefulness** – when the “person takes pains to avoid making intellectual mistakes... and also has a grasp of the rules of good thinking and related intellectual activities” (p.105).
- **Intellectual thoroughness** – when the “person is disposed to probe for deeper meaning and understanding” (p.117).

Required for continued progress, and in particular, depth of understanding.

Baehr’s nine core virtues (3)

- **Open-mindedness** – “one who is willing and able to consider alternative standpoints, to give them a fair and honest hearing, and to revise her own standpoint or beliefs accordingly” (p.126).
- **Intellectual courage** – “when we subject ourselves to a potential loss or harm in the context of a distinctively intellectual pursuit like learning or inquiring after the truth” (p.139).
- **Intellectual tenacity** – is present when a “person doesn’t give up when she doesn’t understand something. Nor does she treat intellectual failure or defeat as a final judgment of her abilities” (p.150).

Virtues for overcoming obstacles throughout the learning process.

Findings: Big6 (Eisenberg, and Berkowitz, 1988)

- Manifest and latent analysis failed to identify any virtues with any degree of confidence
  - e.g. first step, “task-definition”, it is stated that, “Before using any other information skill, students must first be able to articulate information needs”.
  - Within the objectives listed for this skill, the focus is on a specific information-seeking problem, and thus has limited interpretation.
- Closest to a degree of interpretation incorporating character concepts was step two, “information-seeking strategies”, which suggests, “examining alternative approaches to the problems of acquiring appropriate information”.
  - This could be associated with virtues of open-mindedness, intellectual autonomy, and intellectual humility.
- Overall the Big6 was found to be overtly task-focused, and thus limited in relation to character development.
Findings: ACRL framework

- None of the nine virtues were manifest within the framework.
- Relationships were identified within the latent analysis of the framework.
- Important to note that the reference to the acquisition of “dispositions” within the framework suggests consideration of development of character traits.

Within the ACRL framework

- **F1. Authority is Constructed and Contextual**
  - Latent presence of several virtues
    - Notion of “informed skepticism” could be seen to support open-mindedness and intellectual carefulness as virtues
- **F2. Information creation as a process**
  - No presence of core virtues
- **F3. Information has value**
  - No presence of core virtues
- **F4. Research as Inquiry**
  - Latent presence of the virtue of curiosity in notion that:
    - “Experts see inquiry as a process that focuses on problems or questions in a discipline or between disciplines that are open or unresolved.”

Within the ACRL frames

- **F5. Scholarship as conversation**
  - Latent presence of several core virtues: open-mindedness, intellectual humility, intellectual carefulness and intellectual thoroughness supported by:
    - “Experts are...inclined to seek out many perspectives, not merely the ones with which they are familiar.”
- **F6. Searching as strategic exploration**
  - Latent presence of intellectual humility:
    - “Searching for information is often nonlinear and iterative, requiring the evaluation of a range of information sources and the mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues as new understanding develops.”
Discussion

- Development of intellectual character in children can be considered in relation to nine virtues
- Examination of two key information literacy frameworks showed limited presence of virtues
- “Language of virtue” present in ACRL framework
- Using the language of virtue in inauthentic ways, or over-using the terms when not actually undertaking teaching from that perspective risks backfiring on educators [Baehr, 2015, p.363].

Challenges in a VE approach

- Development of character is an incremental and iterative process
- “Discussing academic content in ways that are inquisitive, attentive, careful, thorough, [and] honest” (Baehr, 2015, p.507).
- Such principles of incremental learning are synergistic with recommended approaches to information literacy education.

Further research recommendations

1. Further theoretical refinement of information literacy education models to explicitly incorporate application of intellectual character virtues.
2. Empirical studies with children to explore appropriate methods of intellectual character development to inform information literacy education programmes.
3. Analysis of current information literacy education for practitioners to consider how VE concepts can be introduced into the professional body of knowledge.
Conclusions

- Cultivation of character in children to foster virtuous citizenship must now consider behaviours in both the physical and digital space.
- We have identified limited presence of concepts of intellectual character in our sample of IL models.
- Full paper examining a wider range of information literacy frameworks in development for publication in 2019.

References