

Feedback and student virtues

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Theory and practice associated with personal development and graduate attributes in higher education can be divided into two aspects: 1) transferable skills and 2) qualities of character (or virtues). If universities are to continue to encourage personal development in their students, then alongside reflecting on the generic skills exhibited in student outputs (e.g. critical thinking, oral communication), an overlooked method for stimulating growth and self-awareness is reflection-on-virtues via assessments. An argument is advanced that virtues such as open-mindedness, enthusiasm and perseverance can be signified by qualities of essays and other assessments, and that attention to these virtues could play a significant part in the development of student attributes. Practical and ethical limitations on this approach are discussed, and it is concluded that although these might rule out its use in certain feedback situations, it remains a possibility in others (e.g. in dialogue, and where the insight is student-led).

Keywords: feedback; assessment; student virtues; student engagement; dialogue.

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Introduction

Higher education teaching in the UK, other English speaking countries, and the European Union (e.g. NCIHE 1997, European Commission 2002, University of Sydney 2011) is increasingly required to understand its responsibilities to students as extending beyond academic development. Terms like ‘graduate attributes’ and ‘student identity’ typically refer to employment related skills, personal development and self-reflection. In the literature on higher education theory and practice two important themes that inform and respond to this trend are, firstly, criticisms of its instrumental nature (e.g. Blake et al 1998, Nussbaum 2010); and secondly, arguments and evidence which claims that a holistic view of the student should influence teaching practices, but which do not approach this in terms of a narrow economic framework (e.g. Rogers 1967, Barnett 1997, 2007, Brockbank and McGill 1998, Mann 2001, Beard et al 2005, Jarvis 2005, 2006, Shulman 2005, Case 2007, Hanscomb 2007, Ashworth and Greasley 2009, Bonnett 2009, Nussbaum 2010). This article is primarily (but not entirely) concerned with the latter topic. It hypothesises, in the first instance, a particular kind of correspondence between the qualities found in a student’s work and the qualities found in the student as a person more roundly conceived (what is here being termed ‘student virtues’). In the

second instance it offers some suggestions as to how this might be reflected in assessment and feedback practices.

Among the student (or ‘graduate’) attributes implicitly or explicitly promoted by many universities (e.g. University of Sydney 2011, University of Glasgow 2011), the relationship between skills such as ‘effective communication’ and ‘critical thinking’ and academic output is relatively uncontroversial and straightforward. These attributes can be mapped onto academic learning and performance, and duly reflected in assessment criteria, such that a student is able to articulate to (typically) an employer what they learned at university aside from subject-specific knowledge. The argument put forward in this article, however, is that academic outputs also have the potential to serve as indicators of attributes such as open-mindedness, flexibility, self-confidence and conscientiousness.

Virtues and student attributes

In the descriptions and prescriptions associated with personal development, graduate attributes and graduate identity in higher education two, somewhat overlapping, subsets can be identified; on the one hand there are what might be called ‘skills’ (or ‘performance’ (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011)), and on the other, what will be referred to here as ‘virtues’. Skills are abilities - developed via academic work and extra-curricula activities - that are seen to be readily applicable to other practices, usually the workplace. Examples include effective oral presentations and IT skills.

Virtues, on the other hand, are elements of a student's character such as trustworthiness, conscientiousness, self-confidence and empathy that are considered important by the university, employers, and the culture at large. They have a long history, and discussions of virtues can be found in most religions; most ethical, social and political philosophies, and, more recently, in the literature of psychotherapy and counseling (e.g. Rogers 1961; Yalom 1980; Maslow 1987). For the purposes of this paper, they can be unpacked in terms of the following aspects:

(1) They are similar to personality traits or 'disposition' in so far as they are relatively stable, impact on a variety of situations, and are more likely to feature in a person's (intimate) self-description. Unlike traits, however, they denote only positive qualities.

(2) They are cultivated rather than simply innate. They usually involve an element of personal effort in their acquisition, even though that effort will be less arduous for the person who is constitutionally disposed to the virtue in question. Stan van Hooft (2006, 13) uses the analogy of an ability to play a musical instrument: 'a genetically enabled disposition that we acquire by habit or training and by a commitment to its values'.

(3) Many are explicitly linked to ethical behaviour (e.g. honesty, justice, generosity, charity), but this is not a necessary link. Aristotle did not primarily ask questions like "what's wrong with killing" or "what's wrong with lying", but asked "how are we to live well?", and living well means more than one's duties to other people. Virtues, understood in this way, are 'traits of character that allow us to live full and fulfilling lives' (Hooft

2006, 132). For instance, what John Rawls calls the ‘Aristotelian Principle’ involves exercising our ‘innate or trained abilities’ including ‘personal affection and friendship, meaningful work and social cooperation, the pursuit of knowledge and the fashioning and contemplation of beautiful objects’ (1999, 373). The Latin root of virtue – *virtus* – means ‘excellence’ or ‘ability’ (Hooft 2006, 1), and thus wisdom is a virtue, but not in a directly ethical sense, and virtues like courage and perseverance will facilitate excellences in variety of contexts (intellectual, sporting, professional etc.).

(4) It is generally agreed that the various core virtues are mutually supportive; the presence or absence of one will imply the presence or absence of others (e.g. justice implies wisdom, patience implies self-restraint, modesty implies self-knowledge and social sensitivity). Thus a person who wants to develop virtues cannot develop them in isolation, and this requirement is further linked to a common feature of virtue theories; the need to develop ourselves as an integrated whole (e.g. Russell 1961, 140).

(5) There are competing ideas about the nature and function of virtues and about which virtues are important, and these, in turn, are supported by a variety of conceptions of human nature and ethical imperatives. There are Homeric virtues, Aristotelian virtues, Stoic virtues, Jewish virtues, Christian virtues, Nietzschean virtues, socialist virtues, conservative virtues, anarchist virtues and so on. Here is not the place, however, to enter a discussion of ethical relativism. It is hopefully enough to acknowledge, as Alasdair MacIntyre says, that ‘virtues are understood in terms of a ‘prior account of certain features of social and moral life in terms of which it has to be defined and explained’

(1985, 186). Such an account includes the notion of what an individual is to be like and to do in order to be happy or fulfilled. For Aristotle, for example, it was a biological *telos*, for Christianity it is spiritual, for Benjamin Franklin it was (material) success. Within a given culture there will be a variety of perspectives that determine the conditions of virtuous actions, and these will be manifest, in varying combinations, in the internalized values of individuals. They are in theory mutable, but many are relatively stable; if not across millennia and widely disparate cultures, then at least within historical epochs (such as post-industrial revolution) and dominant ideologies (such as liberal democracy). For this reason, in an applied setting like student attributes, we should not be overly concerned by the question of relativism; we can promote empathy and courage without worrying that they might go out of fashion. However, in another respect – one that I will return to later on – we do need to be aware of the presence and agendas of localized players that prioritize and frame certain virtues, most obviously managerial and business cultures.

In many respects ‘virtues’ and ‘attributes’ are synonymous, but there are several reasons for introducing the idea of ‘virtue’ into this higher education context. First, it seems well suited to the kinds of positive personal qualities that are explored in the literature I have highlighted, even though the specific language of virtues (with a few exceptions such as McFarlane (2004)) is largely (and surprisingly) absent. Much more commonly we find concepts from existentialism and phenomenology (such as ‘authenticity’, ‘commitment’ and ‘becoming’), and from psychotherapy and counseling (such as ‘growth’ and ‘emotional intelligence’). Both of these traditions can be understood as having significant cross-over with virtue theory, and there is an argument

for 'virtue' being both flexible and rich enough to make it a highly suitable umbrella under which to pull these strands together. The second and related point is that virtue theory itself provides an alternative 'way in' for further research into student attributes. Not only is it flexible, rich and long-standing, but by encompassing both personal development and ethics in the sense indicated, it is very well aligned with the aspirations of this field of study. A third reason is that 'virtue' has fewer instrumental connotations than 'attributes'. Discussion of attributes, both within the theoretical literature and within the guidance presented to students, is strongly associated to 'employability' which, whilst important, should not be understood as the *only* reason, or for that matter as a *necessary* reason, for engaging with personal development.

Assessments and virtues

Explaining how assessments might function as signs of student virtues begins with the recognition that they can, and often do, serve as a means of assessing the development of various skills. When marking essays, for example, we will typically comment on analytical abilities demonstrated, and skills of expression, structure and presentation. Academic achievement is thus about more than students' knowledge of their disciplines, and for that matter it is about more than their ability to explain complex ideas and evaluate competing theories (even though these are themselves transferable skills). The extent to which we make it apparent to students that what they learn in this respect is

relevant to non-academic settings is another matter, but that they are in fact assessed partially in terms of these skills is uncontroversial.

More controversial, or at least novel, is the claim that assessments are fertile sources of insight into student virtues. Initially it can be acknowledged that, in at least one respect, aspects of a student's character (and not just her knowledge and skills) are called into question by markers. In cases of plagiarism criticism of the student can refer to her poor understanding of academic practices, but often it also calls into question her character – specifically her honesty and willingness to make the effort required to write original work. It is not just a technical offence, it is a *moral* offence; the educational analogue of fraud.

What is primarily being discussing here does not directly fall under this category of 'moral offence', but is instead a selection of virtues that can be argued to have an important bearing on academic performance, whilst at the same time serving as indicators of more generalized character strengths and weaknesses. The first step is to offer some examples of how features of academic output, and student responses to feedback, can act as signs of more global character traits. It must be stressed, however, that in no sense is this list claiming to be complete; the aim of this paper is not to produce a definitive set of academically relevant virtues, but to explore the conceptual plausibility and practical applications of the link in question.

1. **Open-mindedness.** Another word might be 'receptiveness', the willingness to listen to and actively engage with unfamiliar ideas. For Rogers 'openness to experience' (1967, 115-118), and 'loosening of constructs' (1967, 137, 280) is a strong sign of psychological

health. Similarly Maslow's research found that 'psychologically healthy people' are 'attracted to the mysterious, to the unknown ... the unorganized, and unexplained.' (1987, 24). More recently Peterson and Seligman (2004) list open-mindedness, curiosity and love of learning under the general virtue of 'Wisdom and Knowledge', and employers have been shown to value it highly in their graduate recruits (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011, 580). The opposite is narrow thinking and dogmatism, and in the context of a student essay the arguments presented (and the essay as a whole) might end up weaker because one side of the debate is not taken seriously, or other possible approaches to the issue are not discussed or even acknowledged.

Two signs – and possibly causes - of closed-mindedness are poor listening and faulty thinking. Listening is a 'crucial skill' (Hargie 2004, 169) that is 'far harder to do than is generally realised' (Winbolt 2002, 117), and the same can presumably be applied to accurate reading. As well as its necessity for truth-seeking, it is basic to harmonious teamwork and sound leadership (e.g. Burns 1978; Daft 1999; Bass and Riggio 2006), and for personal well-being (Hargie 2004, 170). In academic assessments a deficit in this area results in inaccurate and incomplete descriptions, explanations and summarizing of protagonists' positions.

Open-mindedness requires effort and courage. 'Listening is a very dangerous thing. If one listens one may be convinced' said Oscar Wilde (in Hargie 2004, 190). 'If you really understand another person ..., if you are willing to enter his private world and see the way life appears to him, without any attempt to make evaluative judgments, you run the risk of being changed yourself.' (Rogers 1961, 333) It does not, however, have to be a change to oneself in any profound sense that necessitates various degrees of effort and courage.

To recognise one is wrong, even with regard to a small and localised issue, goes along with the recognition that one will have to re-think and re-write previous efforts (Perry 1970, 52), and may be associated with a knock to one's pride.

2. Flexibility. Aristotle saw virtues as the mean between two extremes; for example courage sits between the poles of cowardice and rashness (1976, 103). This model might not work for all virtues, but seems to provide a plausible account of flexibility. It is situated between, for example, excessive respect and disrespect for rule and norms, and between excessive tendencies to accommodate and ignore the desires of others. Flexibility is a frequently used term in descriptors of ideal job applicants, and in discussions of graduate attributes. It refers to both cognitive and socio-emotional flexibility, and is opposed to tendencies such as unimaginative approaches to problem solving, and to unwillingness to accommodate the shifting demands and idiosyncrasies of team members, managers and subordinates.

Applied to academic output, we might see conformity and rebelliousness with regard to the norms of essay writing as polarities, and there will be other discipline-specific practices that, like most rules, must allow for exceptions. Making sound judgements, and demonstrating the will-to-accommodate contingencies and particularities, appears to be a strong case for a virtue of the mean that will reveal itself in many areas of life. Lack of confidence, unimaginativeness and overly narrow focus are possibilities of one pole; egocentrism, arrogance, perhaps naïve exuberance or a misunderstanding of the meaning and appropriate exercise of creativity and innovation are possibilities of the other.

3. **Respectfulness.** A range of ethical virtues such as justice, fairness and empathy, and several more generalized and intellectual virtues such as modesty and social intelligence are implied by a student's willingness to read and listen carefully to the views of those with whom they are unfamiliar, or disagree with. There is a clear link between respectfulness and open-mindedness; both are impeded by the fear of 'being changed' discussed earlier, and in both cases modesty is a crucial virtue. They are, however, differently oriented; one towards adventurousness, curiosity, self-exploration and creation; the other towards justice and the well-being of the other. For different students, these two could be more or less powerful motivators towards what would be in some respects similar results; more careful exposition and more balanced arguments.

The absence of these, combined with, say, a dismissive tone or even more passive signs such as the glaring omissions of important commentators and points of view, could be signs of tendencies towards disrespectfulness. With oral communication such as dialogues in seminars, body language and paralinguistic factors can serve as more vivid indicators of dismissive attitudes; ones that potentially extend beyond academic practice.

4. **Care and attention.** Some recent research into 'graduate identity' found 'grave concern' among employers over graduates' ability to 'check and revise their work and considered this to be one of the most lacking of competencies' (Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011, 579). In contrast to sloppiness, care in relation to the presentation of work (e.g. attractive layout, minimal typos and punctuation errors) connects to the general virtue of conscientiousness (or industriousness), and to the 'anti-virtue' (Michael Slote's expression (1983)) of laziness. To the extent that a student is unaware of the importance

of presentation in terms of the impact and grading of her work (and other forms of communication), and to the extent that she is unaware that proof-reading (by oneself or by a peer) seriously improves presentation, then she is short on a form of practical wisdom (Aristotle's *phronēsis*).

5. **Perseverance** differs from care and attention in that it refers to things like a student's willingness to fully formulate and think through difficult concepts and arguments. Peterson and Seligman (in Hooft 2006, 131) take it to be synonymous with persistence and industriousness, and describe it as 'finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles ... taking pleasure in completing tasks.' A common weakness in essays is the incomplete paragraph, where a point is only half, or three-quarters made; where from the marker's perspective the potential to do better is clear and even just an increment more perseverance on behalf of the author would have elevated them to a higher level in terms of clarity of understanding. Sometimes this is caused by what might be called 'cognitive strain'; a requirement to think harder and deeper that they are unwilling to respond to; and sometimes it is purely a matter of the time and effort the student is willing to put in.

These two causes seem to be related to two further sets of virtues. On the one hand there is courage and resilience; a student might not persevere because to do so risks the kind of failure that they have to take responsibility for. It is the kind where there is no option but to acknowledge "I tried my best but still didn't quite get there", which carries with it the harsh truths of personal limitations and/or future hard slog. The resilient

student exhibits willingness to reframe their self-perception and objectives to whatever degree is required, and he is prepared to work harder in response to defeat.

The second set of virtues that might influence student persistence is dealt with under the next heading.

6. Commitment, energy and enthusiasm. This collection of virtues encompasses notions such as ownership, passion (e.g. Kierkegaard 1974, Barnett 1997), zest (Russell, 1930), and exuberance (Redfield Jamison, 2004). A ‘measure of authenticity’ in a student, says Barnett, is her ‘commitment’, and part of being committed is the ‘infusing’ of the student into her actions (2007, 51). A detailed account of the development of this kind of intellectual responsibility and commitment is found in the work of William Perry who describes commitment as ‘affirmation’ that is made ‘*after* detachment, doubt, and awareness of alternatives have made the experience of personal choice a possibility’ (1970, 136). With many essays (and other forms of assessment) students are required to offer a firm answer to a question, or to reach a firm conclusion on a complex issue (even if that conclusion amounts to an informed argument for why at this stage it is hard to reach a strong conclusion). One way of failing to achieve this is to offer a series of points that, although relevant to the question, lacks an overarching critical narrative. The student has failed to impose themselves on the material and thus failed to reach a satisfactory conclusion. With new undergraduates this is often the result of not being fully conversant with the distinctive demands of higher education, but it can also be a sign of unwillingness to fully commit to the task; to take full responsibility and ownership of it.

Where this is the case it could be a sign of a lack of confidence, or a (related) unwillingness to be decisive or to take risks. These tendencies could of course be quite localized – relevant, say, to the particular subject matter they are writing on – but it could also be an indicator of a more fundamental aspect of their character. No only do they tend to approach assessments in this way, other tasks (e.g. family and friendship responsibilities) are done ‘at arms length’. In the workplace this same issue might manifest itself in their approach to projects and teamwork.

For Barnett though the ideal student needs more than commitment; ‘what is further required is that the student injects some energy of her own’ (1997, 172). The student who exhibits this ‘critical energy’ towards her work will be more tuned in to the subject matter and the task at hand, and one would imagine less likely to be satisfied by underdone descriptions, analyses and arguments. As well as fewer incomplete paragraphs (see ‘perseverance’), signs of energy and enthusiasm will permeate an essay and be apparent in its structure (including the forcefulness of its introduction and conclusions) and its written style.

In accordance with the unity of virtues, enthusiasm implies ownership and responsibility, and also courage. In part the source of such energy is a matter of finding what interests us, and the enthusiasm will follow, but there is also something in the idea that for some of us it helps to be reminded of the value of finding and stoking this *intensity* of emotion. The result might be called a ‘proactive affectivity’; not to wait for the cognitive content of the emotion to stir-up energy, but to be prepared in the first instance to approach a task *energetically*. Through such an approach, that which we find interesting is amplified, and that which is potentially less interesting has a greater chance

of engaging us. The graduate with proactive affectivity, we might say (in CV speak), is someone who is positive about ‘meeting new challenges’ (University of Glasgow, 2011; see also Hincliffe and Jolly 2011, 577).

7. Constructive response to criticism. Defensiveness in response to negative feedback will impair learning and development. As most of us are aware, it is very hard to take criticism on the chin, but since it is a foundation of effective self-reflection it is a vital capacity to develop. As a virtue, being able to respond constructively to criticism is related to resilience, modesty and courage, and it highlights the extent to which we exist, and therefore must develop, *in relation to others*. As Bonnett says, ‘we reveal ourselves most fundamentally through those of our actions that directly affect others, and that by choice or necessity are taken up by them in some way (including ... responses of rejection)’ (2009, 360).

The art of receiving criticism seems to require achieving equilibrium between defensive measures that, on the one hand dismiss it, and on the other magnify it. The best response involves the kind of measured realism we associate with emotional maturity (and modesty (Flanagan 1990)), and of course it is precisely because work and criticism *are significantly personal* that receiving feedback will be emotionally intense. Emotions are conceptually linked to our cares and desires (Solomon 2003, Nussbaum 2001), and if we care about anything we tend to care a lot about the talents and virtues that part-constitute our worthiness. It is also significant that since the cause, intensity and motivating power of emotions is linked not only to an individual’s desires, but also to their beliefs and judgments (e.g. Lazarus 1991, Nussbaum 2001, Solomon 2003, Rue

2006)) then the most effective way of dealing with unwanted emotions is for the individual to alter (extinguish, re-prioritize, reframe, moderate etc.) these beliefs and judgments. In many ways this is the heart of personal growth, and is intimately bound to virtues like courage, resilience, patience and humility. And if there is a meta-virtue conditioning this whole enquiry, then it is self-knowledge (including the avoidance of self-deception).

Teaching practice: benefits and problems

The two main claims that have been made are, firstly, that it is helpful to understand a subcategory of student attributes in terms of virtues, and secondly that these virtues are, to varying extents, implicit in academic assessments. From this it can be concluded that there is potential for student reflection-on-virtues to be facilitated by the right kind of 'reading' of students' work. It is, however, one thing to accept the premises and conclusion of this argument and quite another agree that this should make a difference to our teaching practices. This section will address this question in terms of the practical and ethical implications of attempting to facilitate this kind of reflective learning in higher education.

Congruence

It is notoriously difficult to encourage students (especially on non-vocational courses) to engage with personal development, employability and even study skills (e.g. Wingate

2006, Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011). For many, personal development promoted by the institution is likely to seem irrelevant and potentially intrusive, but if matters of personal attributes are congruent with academic performance, then these factors are mitigated. There are two meanings of ‘congruent’ here; firstly the objective conceptual link between academic output and personal attributes, and secondly the subjective moment of insight, perhaps in dialogue with a tutor, where the connection becomes personally meaningful. (See, e.g., Brockbank and McGill (1998, 204) on ‘immediacy’.)

An example illustrating a problematic approach to student attributes, and in many respects the opposite of what is being advocated here, is found in a discussion of ‘wisdom’ by Steven Schwartz (2011), Vice-Chancellor of Macquarie University. Schwartz’s claim is that wisdom has been forgotten as an aim of higher education and that it should be re-emphasized. He sums this up by saying that alongside skills (‘vocational training’) we ‘have a duty to help [students] at least to think about what kind of people they want to be.’ (36) Wisdom comes through experience, but also through reading widely, and so Schwarz’s answer is to teach medical students (the example he uses) about great philosophers and poets alongside medicine.

Coming from a Vice-Chancellor, the overall aim here seems laudable, but this bolt-on approach overlooks certain nuances of encouraging students to engage with personal development. The main problem is motivation; no matter what the rhetoric of the institution, the everyday lived experience of the medical student, with its clear, intense and congruent focus on medical theory and practice, as well as its ‘signature pedagogies’ (Shulman 2005), is not going to psychologically mesh with the subject matter and methods of disciplines like philosophy for the vast majority of students. The justifications

for this broader learning may be sound, but they are highly abstract, and even if accepted by students it will likely only be at this abstract level.

Missing from Schwarz's approach is the method by which wider issues and questions – even those, like medical ethics, that are quite close to the primary aims of medicine – become *meaningful* to the student. That method is reflection of the kind generated spontaneously by the student's personal experiences (typically, but not necessarily, perceived crises and failures). The kind of 'wisdom' Schwarz is talking about develops organically, through responses to personal challenges in situations that *matter*. To the student academic performance normally matters and so this is the domain in which we should be prompting self-reflection. And if the connection being suggested really does exist, then these reflections can be potentially very wide-ranging.

Product and person

However, the orthodoxy regarding feedback is that it should be directed at the work, not the person, and this is the opinion of many of the commentators whose theoretical approach this work aligns itself with (e.g. Boud 1985, Brockbank and McGill 1998, Värlander 2008). In other words, even an acceptance of a holistic approach to student identity is not always enough to support a breaking down of the product/person boundary at the level of feedback practices.

The reasons for this are practical and ethical in nature, and for the most part they are good reasons. For instance, to imply that the student is dogmatic rather than the essay being dogmatic will tend to generate greater defensiveness, whether that implication is

true or not. Perhaps more to the point, how does the marker *know* that it is true? The reality of institutional education is that this level of intimacy between student and teacher is rare. And, even where it exists, does the teacher have the *right* to probe the student's character in this way?

In response to these serious issues the following points can be made:

(1) It is especially important with this kind of reflective practice that it is led by the student. Building reflection-on-virtues into impersonal assessment practices is of course wrongheaded to the extreme of being comical. Imagine for instance a tabular cover sheet with categories such as 'thoroughness of arguments', 'coverage of different positions', and 'presentation' being commented upon in terms of 'implications for student virtues', or perhaps corresponding to boxes where grades are entered under a selection of virtues ('open-mindedness', 'modesty', 'perseverance' etc.)

Instead, reflection-on-virtues needs to occur in dialogue, and in this respect this approach is aligned with literature that stresses the importance of dialogue for effective feedback (e.g. Prowse *et al* 2007, Price *et al* 2011). Many of us will have met with students to discuss their work and witnessed the dialogue generating quite personal reflections on why they repeat certain errors. This does not have to feel anxious and urgent - it can be in the mode of calm enquiry - but quite often it is in those moments of frustration, where emotion and a sense of personal crisis are magnified, that we encounter a willingness in the student to look deeper into the causes of perceived failure.

In such cases the counseling analogue is apposite. A teacher can potentially seize these moments and facilitate, via the use of basic techniques such as accurate and active

listening, 'immediacy', empathy and self-disclosure (e.g. Brockbank and &McGill 1998, Ch.10,11), a student's exploration of links between common strengths and weaknesses in their assessments and their character in the wider sense.

(2) Whilst it is acknowledged that anonymous marking can play a crucial role in ensuring fairness - especially in circumstances where there are cultural tensions concerning issues like race, gender and religion - it can also be seen as preventing the marker properly engaging with a student in the more holistic sense in question. One aspect of such an approach would be the gauging of academic development from one assessment to the next. For example, a student might not be learning from her mistakes due to lack of care and attention, or due to defensiveness; or she might continue to misunderstand a central concept. Clearly there is a greater probability of this being identified if the work is not being marked anonymously.

It can also be asked that if the product and the person are indeed closely linked then anonymity cannot entirely solve the fairness problem. Aspects of a personality can be read into a published work. Without knowing the author we can spot traces of, say, arrogance or humility, perhaps political or ethical leanings, in even relatively neutral (e.g. ostensibly non-political) texts, and these can prejudice our reception of the ideas. This becomes all the more dangerous if these processes are relatively unconscious. One consideration arising from this point is the need to inform teachers of this tendency so that they can be on guard against it.

Ethics

To repeat a general caveat concerning the implementation of reflection-on-virtues via assessments; in all circumstances, if attempted at all, it must be done with great caution. This concern can be cashed out in terms of several ethical issues. One is the broad question of whether universities should be formally engaging in personal development at all. This matter, although of immense importance, is too far removed from this article's focus to be tackled head-on. More pressing are the issues of consent, the emotional climate in which students are working, and the selection of the virtues promoted.

(1) In order for higher education to assume the personal development agenda - particularly in a way that is formalized and/or assessed - it seems right that students should be aware of, and consent to, the extent of this ambition. What precisely this might amount to is unclear - being clearly communicated on websites and in prospectuses and its communication via student advisers from the start of the first year are obvious examples - but that there is clarity concerning the purposes of university education, and that they have at least tacitly agreed to this, seems important for defusing some ethical concerns about the intrusiveness of any attempt to impose this approach upon them. Along with this agreement goes the implication that students ought to take this part of their education seriously.

(2) From the perspective of student emotions, self-reflection and criticality, which require, among other things, risk taking and openness to criticism, need to take place against a suitably supportive background. This is what one commentator calls a 'positive emotional climate' (Värlander 2008, 153) and for Sarah Mann is facilitated by 'the

responses of solidarity, hospitality, safety and the redistribution of power' (2001, 18). If we want students to be fully engaged in the learning process then in part what is needed is a non-objectifying relationship in which individual particularity is acknowledged and respected (Brockbank and McGill 1998, Mann 2001, Ashworth and Greasley 2009). Close and careful listening (and reading) has already been discussed as a student virtue, but on a slightly different level we should also consider its importance for teachers. Empathetic listening is a technical skill (e.g. Hargie and Dickson 2004), but one that should be seen as within the remit of a teacher to acquire.

(3) The third ethical consideration reprises an issue raised under 'relativism' when outlining the nature of virtues. This is the matter of the source of the virtues in question. As discussed, some will be fairly 'timeless' and uncontroversial, but others are prioritized because of various contemporary agendas. Even where teaching staff support such agendas it seems vitally important for the personal development of students that they are aware of the background conditions shaping the virtues that are being promoted.

Making reference to the TV programme *The Apprentice*, Hooft (2006) discusses competitiveness. Whilst acknowledging its place among a credible set of virtues promoted by 'contemporary, free market, capitalist societies', including 'willingness to take risks' and 'decisiveness', in the wrong context it can become an 'imposter-virtue', engendering 'insensitivity, short-term thinking, abrasiveness, selfishness and the willingness to sacrifice the interests of others for the sake of a paltry outcome.' (134-5)

As an antidote to such imbalances the importance of 'criticality' (Barnett 1997; Mann 2001) as a cardinal student virtue is once again underlined, as is one of Aristotle's

principal virtues - 'practical wisdom' (*phronēsis*). This type of wisdom is not the application of particular knowledge and skills to particular tasks, but the ability to make sound judgements, in situations of all kinds, that stem from self knowledge and from experience and understanding of what makes a human life fulfilling (van Hooft 2006, 76). And this, we should note, connects this discussion to the question of the purposes of higher education (out-with knowledge of one's discipline). Emphasising criticality and self-knowledge can unsettle the dominant 'employability' norm and reasserts other reasons for pursuing higher education, including maturation and self-understanding.

An interesting upshot of this discussion is that if we are to encourage graduate virtues (whether or not it is via reflection on assessments), then we should also be giving our students a grounding in ethics and politics. This holistic appreciation underpins the American liberal arts approach, and various institutions in the UK and elsewhere are becoming increasingly alive to this implication, but on the whole this aspect of self-knowledge will be absent from the curricula of most students studying in institutions that promote personal development.

Level of implementation and different forums

(1) If the preceding issues are deemed enough to rule out the promotion of reflection-on-virtues via assessments in many feedback situations, then a minimal application of the assessment-virtue link, that appears relatively uncontroversial, could remain. This is to simply *inform* students of its existence, and do nothing more unless this is directly

initiated by the student (and only then if the teacher is comfortable to engage with the process). Most will not have considered it before, and an institution's expressed commitment might help motivate those that have, however vaguely. Reflection-on-virtues, handled in this way, might find its natural home in self assessment, and potentially informal peer-assessment.

(2) If this approach is to be encouraged out-with self assessment it will likely be more suitable for some forms of teaching than others. For example, on vocational course that already involve reflective journals and more intense bonds between students and teachers (e.g. via the heightened emotionality of teaching observations); or in PhD supervision, and more generally any teaching and learning situations that are akin to mentoring.

(3) Should personal development be deemed irrelevant, impractical or intrusive in the context of academic feedback – especially at the formal institutional level - then perhaps a more congruent arena is that of student advising. Different countries and different institutions will have different advising systems and practices, but in some (and potentially all) cases the relationship with the student is pastoral. Reflection-on-virtues via assessments could be added to the range of approaches available to student advisers, although limitations include a) an adviser's probable greater distance from student's work than their academic tutors; b) an absence of immediacy - feedback is more effective when given 'as soon as you can after the event' (Brockbank and McGill 1998, 209), and c) the amount of work involved if advisers are expected to keep such close track of their students' output.

The first and third of these are significantly mitigated if we assume that this approach is largely student-led. The adviser's job will instead once again involve some basic features of person-centred counseling - listening, empathizing, reflecting back etc. – and thus the need for intimacy with the person and their output is reduced.

Conclusions

The argument presented is that virtues such as open-mindedness and perseverance can be signified by qualities of essays and other assessments, such that if universities are to continue to encourage personal development then, alongside reflecting on the transferable skills exhibited in student outputs, a potential method for achieving this is reflection-on-virtues via assessments. However, teaching techniques and practices should not be used if they are a) significantly impractical and/or b) unethical, and in certain circumstances reflection-on-virtues via assessments will be one or both of these. This though does not rule out its use in some situations, and its level and extent of application is also dependent upon the culture and expectations surrounding feedback practices in general. There are signs that this is changing, including an increasing awareness of the importance of the role of dialogue (e.g. Prowse *et al*/2007, Price *et al*/2011). The more that practice shifts in this direction the greater the potential for reflection-on-virtues via assessments, and the greater the motivation to pursue empirical research into this topic.

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