

'[The values are] a bit old-fashioned. I mean, it makes us sounds like knights or something.'



Using a School's Core Values to Foster Adaptability in Year 9 Boys

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Further Information
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Introduction

At the heart of this action research project lay a fundamental question: is it possible to teach, assess and reward character in a classroom environment. In line with a long term strategic vision for an integrated character education at Harrow School, in October/November 2017, an English class of twenty-two Year 9 boys participated in a six-week project that sought to explore the impact of embedding the four school core values in the learning and assessment process. The success of the project lay in the boys' ability to adapt to a new framework of learning where achievement was seen as a triumph of character, rather than a string of high marks.

The Research Question

How might embedding our core school values in the learning and assessment process foster adaptable behaviour in boys in a Year 9 English class?

Research Context

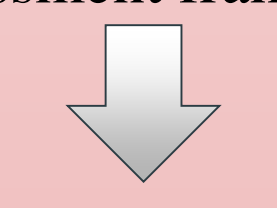
Harrow School was founded in 1572 under a Royal Charter granted by Queen Elizabeth I and is located in a leafy 300-acre estate, encompassing much of Harrow on the Hill in northwest London. The school is academically selective and boys achieve excellent examination results. Harrow School's four core values of

COURAGE, HONOUR, HUMILITY, FELLOWSHIP

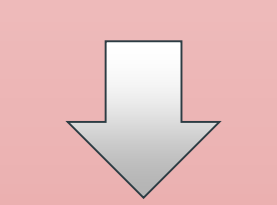
are closely linked to the school's Christian foundation and the principles of 'Godliness and good learning' established by the school's founder, John Lyon.

The Research Action

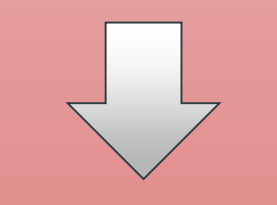
The change in my teaching practice was to introduce a new value-based learning and assessment framework.



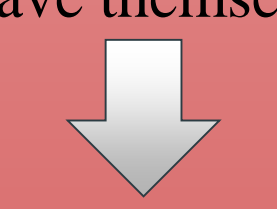
At the start of term, all the boys took part in a questionnaire and a handful in follow-up interviews to establish their current understanding of success and Harrow's core values.



I triangulated and coded the boys' answers in the questionnaire to trace emerging themes about how boys perceived the experience. Using this data, the boys and I then constructed a Values Indicator Document (VID) that contextualised Harrow's core values, placing each value within the context of a Year 9 Harrovian's classroom experience.



Once a fortnight the boys filled in their own 'Values Rating' journal. Using the VID, the boys evaluated and recorded the extent to which they felt they had demonstrated each of the four values. During this reflective practice the boys had to provide justifications (written and/or oral) for why they gave themselves a particular rating.



At the end of the study the boys took part in an exit questionnaire and further interviews, encouraging them to reflect on this new approach to learning. Many of the questions in the initial questionnaire were repeated to identify whether the boys had been successful in adapting to a new learning framework.

Data Collection and Analysis

Drawing on the examples of successful previous action research projects and using Stringer's iterative 'Look, Think, Act' routine (p.9), I employed **qualitative data collection methods** as opposed to quantitative.

I used a variety of data collection methods including:

- questionnaires
- interviews
- journals
- direct observation and participant observation
- photos and videos



I used a process of **polyangulation** to extract deeper meanings from the data. The information from my questionnaires was carefully compared with the data from the boys' journals and from informal interviews. This allowed me to cross-check the accuracy of the data and clarify meanings or misconceptions held by the participants. Pre-project interviews with individuals and groups of boys added further colour to the boys' answers in the questionnaire and allowed me to triangulate data from several sources. Using a **process of categorising and coding**, I reviewed the data from the questionnaire and interviews, and **identified three emerging themes**.

On completion of the final activity in the project, the boys took part in an **exit questionnaire**, reflecting on whether the values had been successfully embedded in their learning process and whether they believed the project had enhanced their learning. These data were triangulated with earlier questionnaires and interviews in order to arrive a deeper understanding about the boys' ability to adapt to a new learning and assessment framework.

'Honour is about doing the right thing and having high standards, so now it's good because I know I have to try and keep up my standards. It's important.'



'[The activity] worked better than normal because we had to listen to each other more carefully because that is what fellowship is.'



Key Findings and Discussion

- The boys felt that the values were 'good' in principle and yet the majority of boys struggled to see how the values could be applied in the context of their everyday lives at school. Boy C commented: **'I like the values because they're obviously good, but I don't really see why they are relevant to me.'**
- Overwhelmingly, the boys' feedback stressed the need to define the values in the context of an Harrovian's school life.
- The values could be contextualised in the lives of Year 9 boys. One boy noted: **'It was good because we all got to say what we thought the values meant and then we knew what the code was.'**
- Once the values were contextualised, the boys started using a shared language of value.
- Through a **structured system of self and peer reflection**, nearly all the boys felt fully engaged with the new value-based culture I hoped to create.

Conclusions

- This action research certainly proved to me that the **school's four core values could be embedded in the learning and assessment process**.
- Furthermore, it became clear that the **boys were not rigid learners and could adapt to a new learning and assessment framework** that prioritised character over traditional test results.
- Rather than seeking out 'Little Ms Perfect' (Claxton and Lucas, 2015) with her string of perfect test results, in the dynamic workplace of the world, employers are increasingly looking for employees with certain *qualities* and *skills*. With this in mind, I am convinced by the **importance of nurturing and rewarding Harrow's core values in our boys' learning environment**.
- Tellingly, this adaptation to a new learning and assessment framework **did not compromise the boys' results in end-of-term assessments**, indicating that there are other, perhaps **more edifying, ways of ensuring boys achieve highly**.

Key Readings

Claxton, G., & Lucas, B. (2015). *Educating Ruby*. Carmarthen, Wales: Crown House.
Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York, United States: Random House.
Tough, P. (2013). *How Children Succeed Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character*. London, United Kingdom: Random House.

