

HOW MIGHT EMBEDDING OUR CORE SCHOOL VALUES IN THE LEARNING AND  
ASSESSMENT PROCESS FOSTER ADAPTABLE BEHAVIOUR IN BOYS IN A YEAR 9  
ENGLISH CLASS?

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**Abstract**

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 school's 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 school 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 test marks.

**Introduction**

'Adaptable behaviour' in this project can be defined as the boys' ability to embrace new learning styles and assessment frameworks that prioritise the exhibition of Harrow's four core values over crude test results. The 2017-18 IBSC focus, *Adaptability in a Changing World*, offered me the chance to challenge the limiting and potentially damaging understanding of success in a Year 9 boys' classroom.

Harrow School is an academically selective boys' school where boys achieve excellent examination results and are used to success in line with traditional forms of assessment. Parents pay significant school fees and naturally expect results; correspondingly, teachers feel anxious to deliver. The general rule at schools like Harrow is, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" and yet, several challenging questions lie beneath this easy mantra. Year after year, the boys achieve excellent results, but at what cost to their mental wellbeing? Are we so focused

on results that we neglect the process of learning as well as the chance to build character in our boys? Are we equipping our boys with adaptable skills that will help them succeed in a rapidly changing world or are we merely churning out boys who can pass a set of examinations but have a “brittle” sense of self-worth and identity? Traditional forms of assessment have their place, but what might happen if test results were not the main criteria for success in the classroom? Is it possible to teach, assess and reward character in a classroom environment?

With these questions in mind, I chose to investigate the following 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?* Through my action research, I hoped to embed our four school values throughout the learning and assessment process in order to bring about a cultural adaptation where boys viewed success as a triumph of character, rather than simply the attainment of high marks. I hoped to show that by prioritising character over test results, boys would not only achieve as highly as ever but, crucially, would adopt exciting new learning habits.

The specific nature of this inquiry naturally lent itself to action research: Harrow is a very old, idiosyncratic school with its own values and therefore a generalised inquiry would not have had the same effect or generated meaningful outcomes. Indeed, Stringer (2014) argues that “the purpose of inquiry is to find an appropriate solution for the particular dynamics at work in a local situation” (p. 6). Boys respond more willingly when they are actively involved in a project and the collaborative nature of action research immediately encouraged the boys to engage with the values of ‘fellowship’ and ‘humility’.

### **Literature Review**

In recent years, leading experts in the field of education have questioned whether our current education model is preparing our students for the challenges of living in a changing world or simply teaching children to pass tests. Ritchhart (2015) argues that “[t]he value of school has traditionally been measured in terms of results – grades on exams, projects, and essays designed by teachers to match the curriculum and dutifully recorded in report cards sent home to parents each term” (p. 15). According to Elliot Eisner (in Ritchhart, 2015), “[a]s long as schools treat test scores as the major proxies for student achievement and

educational quality, we will have a hard time refocusing our attention on what really matters in education” (p. 26). Michael Welsh (in Ritchhart, 2015) echoes these fears, pointing towards a “crisis of significance” in schools where “education has become a relatively meaningless game of grades more than an important and meaningful exploration of the world in which we live and co-create” (p. 24).

If education has become a game of grades, then Harrow School is a key player. As an academically selective school where boys achieve excellent examination results and enjoy success in line with traditional forms of assessment, it is tempting to assume that there is nothing worth changing. As Ritchhart (2015) points out, however, “we tend to perpetuate and reinforce the status quo because it is the only story we know,” even if this story “is not one that is serving students well or adequately promoting the outcomes we say we value” (p. 29). Despite the apparent success of Harrow boys, therefore, one of the niggling questions my action research seeks to address is: are we telling our students the right story?

Diane Rivitch (in Ritchhart, 2015) argues, “The biggest problem in education is that no one agrees on why we educate. Faced with this lack of consensus, policy makers define good education as higher test scores” (p. 15). In the light of this confusion of purpose, it is perhaps helpful to begin with Ritchhart’s question to educators: “What do you want the children you teach to be like as adults?” (2015, p. 16). Using the Chalk Talk routine, Ritchhart (2015) and his teams of educators agreed on a number of attributes they hoped to see in their students once they had left school: They wanted to see students who were “willing to take risks,” “able to persevere,” “respectful,” “committed to community,” “collaborative,” “compassionate,” “willing to learn from his mistakes” and “adaptable” (p. 16). Noticeably, the focus here is not on knowledge or qualifications for, as Claxton and Lucas (2015) argue, “success in the modern world depends on attributes of mind and heart that are deeper than the ability to get your sums right” (p. 80).

Attributes such as, “willing to take risks” and “willing to learn from his mistakes” echo Duckworth’s (2017) and Tough’s (2013) seminal research into the power of “grit” and healthy habits of mind. It also struck me, however, that many of these qualities can be implicitly found in Harrow’s core values of Honour, Courage, Humility and Fellowship; values we believe will prepare “boys with diverse backgrounds and abilities for a life of

learning, leadership, service and personal fulfilment” (Harrow School literature, 2015). This in turn, convinced me that exploring the impact of embedding and foregrounding our own core values in the learning and assessment process would be a worthwhile focus for my research. To adapt a “what if” question from Ritchhart (2015), my research seeks to ask, *what if schools were less about preparing students for tests and more about instilling in them the values we believe will lead to success and personal fulfilment later in life?*

When considering how I might embed our values in the classroom environment, I was drawn to Ritchhart’s notion of “enculturation ... a process of gradually internalizing the messages and values, the story being told, that we repeatedly experience through interaction with the external, social environment” (2015, p. 20). What Ritchhart finds so “powerful” is the “self-reinforcing, continual construction of culture through the dynamic enactment of both individual and collective values” (2015, p. 21). Ritchhart further explains how this process of “enculturation” can be realised by harnessing eight forces, three of which I find particularly pertinent to my own research: “expectations,” “language,” and “modelling.”

By drawing attention to “learning” rather than “work,” Ritchhart indicates how a new set of *expectations* is established in the classroom; where students are rewarded not for just getting things done, but for exploring pathways of learning and for demonstrating perseverance in the face of difficulty. Dweck’s research (2006) into mindsets dovetails neatly with Ritchhart’s ideas here, for if students are encouraged to focus on learning as opposed to results, they are much more likely to adopt a “growth mindset,” understanding, in the words of Morehead (2012), “that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching, and persistence” (in Ritchhart, 2015, p. 56).

*Language* is equally important in the process of enculturation. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) assert that, “the metaphors we use do not merely pepper and enliven our speech; they help us organize our experience and create our realities” (in Ritchhart, 2015, p. 44). Therefore, if I was to bring about a cultural change in my classroom where honour, courage, humility and fellowship are at the heart of the learning process, I needed to make these words part of our everyday discourse. Applying what Peter Johnston (2004) refers to as the practice of “noticing and naming” and Denton (2007) labels “reinforcing language,” it is possible to “draw students” attention to that which we want to highlight and acknowledge” in the

learning process (in Ritchhart, 2015, p. 70). In my case, this meant including demonstrations of our four core values in my classroom.

Drawing on what Dr. Daniel Tosteson, Dean of the Harvard Medical School, referred to as “role models” (in Ritchhart, 2015, p. 125), Ritchhart also argues that *modelling* can be used to guide students towards the values we hope to see developed in the learning process. When explaining what a good role model might look like, Fried (in Ritchhart) notes:

[they] are always taking risks, and they make at least as many mistakes as anybody else (probably more than most). What’s different is how they react to their mistakes: they choose to acknowledge and learn from them, rather than to ignore or deny them. (p. 126)

And how does this affect the culture in the classroom? Fried goes on to explain: “they help make the classroom a safer place for students to make their own mistakes and learn from them” (p. 126). To place this in the context of a Harrovian, if boys see their teacher acknowledging his mistakes and see him as an active participator in the learning process, they are far more likely to place the values of, say, courage and humility at the heart of their own learning.

Stringer (2014) makes it clear that “generalized solutions ... may not fit all contexts or groups to whom they are applied [and action research projects must be] adapted in order to fit the context in which they are used” (p. 6). For my action research project to be a success, therefore, I needed to make sure that it was fully applicable and relatable to a Year 9 boy at an all-boys boarding school in Greater London. Harrow’s core values are honour, courage, humility and fellowship. Noticeably, these are chivalric values that I believed would appeal to the boys due to their connection to traditional male heroes in English literature and history. While traditional, these values need not be limiting. In fact, I would argue that they are more in line with Ehrmann’s (2017) “Healthy Masculinity” than many modern manifestations of masculinity.

Indeed, investigating what it might mean “to be a man,” Cameron Schaefer (2008) came to the conclusion that “selflessness, consistency and humility [stand] out as defining characteristics of passage into manhood” (para. 12). Noticeably, these traits dovetail neatly with Harrow’s own values of fellowship, honour and, indeed, humility. By exploring these

ideas in interviews and questionnaires, I expected the boys would be challenged to reflect on what it might mean to “be a man” in a changing world.

### **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 and 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. As outlined in the school’s purpose, Harrow prepares boys from diverse backgrounds and abilities for a life of learning, leadership, service, and personal fulfilment, drawing attention to five key areas: scholarship, opportunity, character, people, and operations.

I conducted my research project with twenty-two Year 9 boys. As a year group without the pressure of public examinations, this set of boys was an apt choice for involvement in action research. Furthermore, given I was exploring the effects of embedding Harrow’s core values in the learning and assessment process, it seemed sensible to apply this research to boys who had only just entered the school and possessed few preconceptions about teaching or assessment at Harrow.

Both the boys and their parents were sent an informative letter explaining the nature and practical details of the action research process, and all stakeholders were requested to sign a consent form if they wished to take part in the project. The boys’ right to anonymity was assured: no personal details were disclosed without permission from the relevant stakeholders.

### **The Action**

In this study, the introduced “action,” or change in my teaching practice, was to introduce a new value-based learning and assessment framework. Stringer (2014) argues that the first cycle of an action research process is qualitative, “requiring researchers to gather information about participants’ experiences and perspectives and to define the problem or issue in terms that ‘make sense’ in their own terms” (p. 101). For this reason, 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 these 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. This was in line with Stringer's (2014) argument that, "action research envisages a collaborative approach to investigation that seeks to engage 'subjects' as equal and full participants in the research process" (p. 14).

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, which encouraged 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**

Drawing on the examples of successful previous action research projects and using Stringer's (2014) iterative "Look, Think, Act" routine (p. 9), I employed qualitative data collection methods as opposed to quantitative. I analysed my data using a thematic approach, categorising and coding where helpful, and picking out three significant findings.

I used a variety of data collection methods including:

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

The use of questionnaires, interviews, and journals encouraged a participatory approach to data collection as a way of stimulating feelings of “pride, dignity, identity, control, responsibility and unity” (Stringer, 2014, p. 35). Questionnaires, interviews, and journals were important data collection tools because, as Stringer argues, in order to gather enough information to help participants fully understand the outcomes of an action research process, they must be provided with “extended opportunities to explore and express their experience” (p. 58). Furthermore, Stringer underlines the importance of interviews for they “provide opportunities for participants to describe the situation in their own terms” in a process that “symbolically recognises the legitimacy of their experience” (p. 105). Conversations and observations were recorded meticulously to ensure the data were trustworthy and thorough. Rather than resorting to traditional teacher-student hierarchies, I adopted the position of “facilitator” and “catalyst” throughout the project (Stringer, p. 20).

### **Data Analysis**

Mertler (2016) argues that rigor is the key when analysing data and so I used a process of triangulation 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.

A pre-project questionnaire was carried out to establish what the boys understood by the school values and to what extent they felt the values applied to their school lives. 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.

Notably, the boys’ feedback on the need to define Harrow’s values in the context of their everyday lives at school is in line with Ritchhart’s (2015) idea that developing and using common language is one of the eight forces that shape a culture. Indeed, Ritchhart’s ideas became a touchstone for the class as the project developed.

Once we had drawn up our set of contextualised definitions, I was then able to structure my action research more precisely. This involved devising activities specifically calculated to



foreground one or more of the Harrow values in the learning process and applying a bespoke value-based assessment framework. These activities were modified where appropriate applying Stringer's cyclical "Think, Look, Act" model. Using the shared language we had developed, the values (in their contextualised form) were kept at the forefront of the boys' minds as they completed the tasks. At various points during these activities, boys were asked to reflect on their experience in their journals. Several boys were also interviewed and their thoughts and reflections on the project were recorded. In line with Stringer's guidelines, the data from these sources were triangulated in order to gain a more complete understanding of the boys' perspectives and their successes in adapting to a new value-based learning framework.

On completion of the final activity in the project, the boys took part in an exit questionnaire. Here they reflected 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.

### **Discussion of Results**

The qualitative data collected during the project were analysed and categorised. When coded, two broad themes emerged: nearly all 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." Boy J echoed these sentiments, saying: "They're a bit old-fashioned. I mean, it makes us sounds like knights or something." Whilst the boys saw some worth in the school's values, it was clear that without a clear understanding of their relevance, they were unlikely to adapt to a new character-based learning and assessment framework.

Once twenty-two boys had completed the pre-project survey I asked them to reflect on the ways in which the school values might be made more relevant to their lives.

Overwhelmingly, the boys' feedback stressed the need to define the values in the context of an Harrovian's school life. "If *honour* had some real meanings for us then maybe we could

actually try being more honourable in school,” suggested Boy C. Boy F concurred: “If everyone knew the values – what they meant – then it would be like a code.” Boy H noted, however, the practical difficulties of “measuring” value: “Trouble is, it’s, like, impossible to measure if someone is showing a value well. Because, well, with grades you can see it – see the improvement – but with honour or courage that’s difficult to see.”

Having analysed these data, the following next steps in my project became clearer if the boys were to successfully adapt to a new learning and assessment framework:

**Ownership over the values.** After the pre-project questionnaire, the boys were asked to consider and then define the four school values. In a discursive environment the boys defined what honour, courage, humility and fellowship might signify in the classroom. The ideas of the whole class were considered, refined and recorded until we had a list of definitions for each value in one document. When surveyed at the end of the project, the strong majority of the boys believed that this process played an important part in establishing the “values-orientated” culture I hoped to foster. “It was good because we all got to say what we thought the values meant and then we knew what the code was,” remarked Boy C. Boy H added: “[The process] made us understand what it was we were trying to do because now we all agreed what the values meant.” This increased sense of understanding and ownership was echoed by Boy A, who said, “the values are a bit more real now because we’ve said what they are, what they mean.” The question of “overlap” was raised by Boy P, however: he said, “sometimes I wasn’t sure whether a definition should go under a different value.”

**Internalisation of contextualised values: language.** In line with Ritchhart’s (2015) belief that *language* is one of the key factors in the development of a new culture, I devised a set of activities and organised the classroom in a way that foregrounded one or more of the values in the learning process. I found that whilst I was the one using the “language of value” at the start of the project, it was the boys who were using the language by the end, hinting that the boys were successfully adapting to a new learning framework. Indeed, in an apology note for being late to a lesson, Boy T wrote: “My recent organisational slips ups relate to how much honour I portray in my English work... I have not upheld the standards I would like to, and have not taken enough pride in my work.” It was interesting to note the

new behaviours boys developed as they applied the values to their learning. Boy C noted: "It's quite nice because if I am being judged on courage, I can take more chances in my work because that is part of courage." Boy T reflected: "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." Reflecting on a group activity designed to foreground *fellowship*, Boy H noted: "[The activity] worked better than normal because we had to listen to each other more carefully because that is what fellowship is."

**Structured system of self and peer reflection.** To trace how effective the project was in embedding the values in the learning process and encouraging the boys to adapt to a new learning framework, it seemed important to introduce a structured system of self and peer-reflection. Having analysed the data from the boys' journals, I noticed how the majority of boys felt fully engaged with the new value-based culture I hoped to create. Applying the bespoke assessment framework I had devised, Boy K wrote: "I gave myself a four for honour because, even though I try my hardest to complete work to the best of my ability, sometimes I feel that I could put more effort into the appearance of my work. I sometimes write quicker than I need to complete a prep efficiently, but sacrifice the handwriting quality." Noticeably, nearly all the boys were able to articulate their strengths and weaknesses over two-week cycles in the shared language we had all collected when drawing up our initial definitions of the values. Considering the extent to which he had engaged with the value of *courage*, Boy L wrote: "I believe I try my hardest to overcome obstacles when I work and am responsible for my own learning but I need to stretch and challenge myself a little more." Such reflections led me to believe that boys can adapt to a new value-based assessment framework if they have been equipped with the language to do so.

At the end of the project, the boys took part in an exit questionnaire to assess how effective the project had been in embedding the values in the learning process and how successfully they had adapted to a new model of learning and assessment. Seventeen out of twenty-two boys felt the values had been embedded successfully, four felt they had been embedded with part success, and one boy felt the values had not been successfully embedded. All the boys stated that they understood what the values now meant in the context of their academic life at Harrow, and nearly all the boys felt that foregrounding the values in the learning process helped them adopt new and better learning practices. "I think I've learnt

new ways to think and learn because I'm not just doing what I always did," reflected Boy C. Boy K noted: "I'm better in group tasks now because I'm focused on trying to listen to my friends more carefully." When triangulated with the data in earlier questionnaires and interviews, it was clear that nearly all the boys had adapted successfully to a new model of learning and assessment.

### **Conclusion**

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 of the importance of nurturing and rewarding Harrow's core values in our boys' learning environment.

Once the boys had taken ownership of the school's values by defining them in their own language, it was possible to embed the values within the scheme of work I had planned in a way that ensured a strong 'buy in' from the stakeholders. Indeed, even in the short timeframe available, by empowering the boys with a language of value they had helped create, it was possible to see the boys adapting to a new culture of learning.

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. What is more, by adapting to a learning framework that prioritises the school's values over test results, the boys adopted exciting new learning habits. For example, by foregrounding the value of "fellowship" in group exercises, the boys collaborated more effectively and produced more focused and meaningful results than I have previously seen. Furthermore, once the boys had defined what "honour" meant in a classroom environment I noticed a greater degree of accountability where the boys became critics and regulators of their own conduct. Such changes in the boys' behaviour suggested to me that boys could become more mature and

independent learners if they were encouraged to see success as a refinement of character rather than merely a set of excellent test scores.

The results of this action research have caused me to make certain adjustments in my practice as I am now convinced of the importance of a character-based approach to teaching and learning. At the start of each year, I intend to build in time for defining the values and reproducing the VID for each class. Rather than restricting this character-based approach to a six-week project, I intend to apply this teaching and learning framework for the whole academic year.

This action research project also has whole-school implications, particularly in its function as a pilot project for our long-term school vision for an integrated character education program at Harrow School. The small-scale successes of this project will, I hope, help inform and shape the ways in which the Senior Management Team and the Character Education Team at Harrow will implement the school's vision on a much larger scale.

### **Reflection**

My project has opened up several exciting possibilities for my future teaching practice. It is encouraging to think that boys can adapt to a new character-focused learning environment and I look forward to developing my ideas as part of the Character Education Team at Harrow School.

Inevitably, I met with challenges along the way. Whilst the boys proved they could adapt to a new value-based framework of learning and assessment, a tension remained: ultimately, every boy knew that at the end of the year he would be sitting a set of examinations and would be ranked accordingly in his end-of-year report card. Therefore, the question teachers, boys and parents might ask is, *what is the point in developing positive character traits if high examination results is what matters at the end of the day?* However, it has always been my contention that if we succeed in cultivating Harrow's core values in the boys then the examination results will take care of themselves. Indeed, whilst there is not time here for a quantitative analysis of my Year 9 end-of-term examination results, it was notable that the boys performed as strongly as ever and there were no signs of a performance lapse when compared to previous years. If this is the case, could a character-focused educational

experience be more edifying and valuable to the students in the long run than traditional exam-focused styles of teaching and assessing?

What I hoped to achieve was a culture shift in my classroom, a movement away from a results-focused teaching environment to a character-focused one. Inevitably, to bring about a shift in culture one needs time and I certainly felt constrained at points during my project. I am pleased by the adaptability demonstrated by the boys, but I recognise that if such an initiative was rolled out on a larger scale at Harrow School, greater time must be allowed for a cultural shift to take place in the boys' learning.

Throughout the project I was also aware of the tension between the new value-based assessment framework we had developed for the project and the existing assessment framework against which the boys were measured for their half-term and end-of-term reports. This led to some confusion amongst the boys, particularly at the start of the project, as they questioned which criteria took precedence. Once again, if this initiative was rolled out on a larger scale at Harrow School it seems essential that there be consistency in the message delivered to the boys: if we genuinely feel it is most important that they exhibit certain values or character traits, then the assessment framework must encourage and reward them along these lines.

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