

For a Culture of Character and Virtue Education in Europe.

On the Necessity of well-running Educational Concepts and their Networking in the World of Vuca

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1. Challenges of society today and the need for character and virtue education

The global social challenges – financial crises, climate change, Covid 19 pandemic and most recently the Ukraine war in Europe – have shown again and again how much our world needs very well-educated personalities. We need people with heart, character, and virtues, with a broad competence profile, so that they can work for and actively shape a peaceful, humane, democratic coexistence. Globalisation, diversification, and digitalisation as well as pluralisation and the intercultural, transcultural, and religious challenges associated with them, as well as changing social, economic and demographic conditions have left their marks and led to fundamental social and cultural changes. Due to all these influences, our world has become increasingly complex over the decades. Recently, there are also the challenges of using artificial intelligence, which has long dominated the world of work and now also finding its way into our educational systems. So, with all this, individuals must have a broad range of skills including virtues to help shape the future in a resilient manner. Given demographic changes, this challenge will affect more people in Europe on average in the future than it did a few decades ago.

At the same time, people are at maximum tension and stress in all areas of life right now. After the end of Corona, the world seems to turn even faster and even more demands on everyone seem to crush people every day in their professional and private lives. "Please take a break!"¹ was the demand in the weekend edition of Austria's largest daily newspaper on 27 May 2023. 28 pages were dedicated to this topic!

This makes it clear. We need people, personalities, who are able to take good care of themselves and others, as well as to take responsibility for the global society. This can only be achieved through character and virtue education.

¹ Bitte Pause! Schwerpunktausgabe, in: Der Standard. Wochenende, 27./28./29. Mai 2023, Nr. 10.410.

2. Places of Character Education

Universities and other educational institutions as well as employers in all sectors of society bear a great responsibility. I am thinking of schools, institutions for second-chance education, apprenticeship training centres, but also adult education and thus lifelong learning in the world of work.

At universities, leaders of the future world of work are being formed. These include teachers in schools, who, after graduating from university, will accompany a large number of pupils and students on their educational paths as well as managers, who will bear responsibility in business, politics and society. This basically applies to every academic, no matter what field they work in after graduation.

The same applies to schools. Students leave secondary school or even grammar school and start their professional life. Accordingly, character education must already take place at school, or at best in kindergarten. Yet, there is broad agreement on this in the community of those who are engaged in character education anyway. Just look at the conferences of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. In the following, training companies and vocational schools are responsible for providing spaces for character and virtue education, too. They must also promote and accompany the formation of character and virtue in young people, so that they become responsible workers and citizens.

Accordingly, the same applies to the entire world of work.

Therefore, it is urgently necessary to focus on character and virtue education at university, in schools and in the professional field. However, in German-speaking schools, universities, in second-chance education programmes (zweiter Bildungsweg), apprenticeship training centres, especially in Germany and Austria, education and working based on content alone is still dominant. Only some teachers, some consultants, some trainers, and some managers keep a close eye on other forms of competences (social, communicative, cognitive, personal, emotional, spiritual), but mostly only the professional expertise is dominant. The curricula at schools and universities are not yet designed from the perspective of the students, their talents, and assets, and they do not target virtue formation, either. If they are structured in a competence-oriented way, they neglect character and virtue education. The only exceptions are the new curricula for primary (Volksschulen) and secondary schools (Mittelschulen) in

Austria. Mostly, however, teachers are not trained in this area, so they cannot design their lessons accordingly.

The same applies to the world of work. Here, too, only a few companies attach importance to the skills just mentioned. They also focus on professional competence in their daily work, but also in further training. In doing so, they have to realise time and again that more than professional competence is required. They also miss personalities with character and virtue.

However, this does not have to be the case. Education at university and in schools as well as training and further training in an economic context can very well focus on character education without neglecting subject education. This is shown by many individual examples not only from the Anglo-American area, but also in Europe. However, these are not yet connected or enter into synergies. To be effective and to achieve more impact, it is absolutely necessary that the actors of these outstandingly functioning concepts network with each other. They should present their concepts to each other and consider how to learn from each other and how to become stronger and more influential together to lead the world to a good life.

Following this idea, I would like to present a concept that I have developed over the last 25 years. It takes all the above-mentioned necessities into account. Afterwards, it will be shown in which institutions and in which contexts the concept is already being applied and what kind of networking has already taken place. Finally, I would like to show opportunities for connecting and networking.

3. Pedagogical concept – tried and tested for several years and positively evaluated

At the beginning, I have to say something about myself and my profession. After training and working as a bank clerk, I studied theology and chemistry to become a secondary school teacher. Subsequently, I completed my doctorate and habilitation in Church History. Over the years, I have also studied learning theories and neuro-didactics. Today, I am a professor of Church History at the Catholic Private University Linz. I also offer teacher trainings, trainings for students and university professors in the field of character and virtue education, train the trainer courses and programmes for employees in the field of character and virtue education in the church and in business enterprises and leadership programmes.

All of this has inspired my work. Over the years, against the backdrop of the ideal of Catholic education – unfortunately, I cannot go into detail here today about what that means exactly; I have done that elsewhere² – a concept has grown that has resulted in a study programme and a curriculum. Both have been tried and tested and positively evaluated over the decades. The curriculum is described in a book published in 2021. Accordingly, the following descriptions are based on my practical experience and on the theory I described in my book.³

a) Curriculum and learning methods

The curriculum starts with a course in which students work out their ideas of their dream jobs just as they consider what skills they need to fulfill them professionally. Afterwards, they draw out their own talents as well as their competences or skills which they have already developed. Against this background they design their personal way of studying in order to build the skills they will need for their future profession.

This course takes place within the first weeks at the beginning of their studies. Students are trained to find their own, special and individual way of mastering their academic studies according to their future profession and in order to develop their talents and needed competences in the best way. Furthermore, this approach leads to students becoming aware of their motivation, reconsidering their motivation and ultimately starting their studies with intrinsic motivation.

This is the background against which they start their studies. The lectures, seminars and tutorials are designed in such a way that students can train and expand their competences and receive constant feedback. What does this mean?

First of all, Students come to class prepared. One week before the lecture, the students receive historical source material to read for 4 hours as preparation. This material is provided with questions for indexing. In the lesson itself, the students receive specialist input from me on the epoch or topic being discussed (I said that I am a Church Historian and my profession at university is to teach Church History). Afterwards, the students work in small groups on a meta-question or meta-task about the sources they have worked on at

² Cf. Weber, Ines, *Mensch. Talent. Zukunft. Persönlichkeitsbildung in der Hochschule – mit Basis - Curriculum (Mittelpunkt Mensch, vol. 1)*, Ostfildern 2021; cf. Weber, Ines, “Educating is not a profession, but an attitude, a way of being.” *Concepts of catholic pedagogical ethics in university practice* [<https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/userfiles/jubileecentre/pdf/Oriel2023/Weber,%20Ines.pdf> (25.05.2023)].

³ For the following reflections and theses cf. Weber, *Mensch.*

home. With methodological guidance, they then present their results. Afterwards, open questions or ambiguities are discussed, and the subject content is intensively debated. The methods students use to apprehend the historical sources in the lesson are very diverse. They range from different visualisation tasks to role plays, posed discussions or writing discussions.

The whole curriculum is based on a way of teaching that is rarely practised at German-speaking universities. There, students work independently or spend most of their time sitting in lectures listening to the lecturers. On the contrary, in my model, they are highly involved in teaching and learning. Ultimately, they shape their own educational processes independently.

What is the effect?

With appropriate teaching materials, they have already acquired essential subject content before the lesson. Besides, reading and understanding texts and pictures they for example widen their analytical skills as well as their joined-up thinking or their systematic and structural competences. They also train their abilities to change perspective or their empathic capacity. These are just a few examples of competence acquisition. There are many more!

In class, they expand, deepen, and reinforce all these and train their skills even further. With their prior knowledge, individual work, group work and plenary, discussions during class go into much more depth and breadth and are much more effective and interesting. This is one of the biggest advantages of this method: students can interact with their knowledge and competences in the lesson. They ask many more critical questions, and they independently relate them to their future professional work. They really internalise all that.

In other words: With this form of university teaching perspective was changed from a teacher-centred way of teaching to a student-centred way of teaching, and from instructing students what they have to know to independent development of the contents by the students themselves including different dialogues and discussions between teacher and students. No longer are there lectures during which teachers give 90-minute presentations without any place for students for asking and discussing. In this way, students continuously

enlarge their skills and strengths in subject teaching because students participate competently in lessons.

b) Neurobiological basics

One reason for this way of teaching is rooted in the functioning and performance of our brain, in the human constitution and thus in the holistic human being as such. Despite all individuality, appropriation processes follow certain regularities. Reform pedagogy, the beginnings of which go back to the 17th century, has already taken these into account in its educational approach. For decades, school and university didactics, pedagogy, and educational research have been referring to them, and neuro-didactics also drew attention to them a few years ago.

All disciplines emphasise equally that about 95 percent of all people educate themselves by dealing with the contents or with the specialist knowledge as well as with the skills and competences themselves. They have to do that independently, literally by working through them. They have to read content, explain it to others, think it through in conversations with others, prepare presentations, visualise the content, discuss it or write it down. They have to argue, criticise, discuss, engage in dialogue, and they have to listen actively. In other words, people can only acquire content and competences themselves, independently grasping, understanding, thinking through, trying them out and applying them. Only when this happens content and skills can be permanently anchored in the brain so that they can be reactivated and recalled when needed.

Besides, learning is much more successful when people know what they are learning for. Results even increase exponentially, when students understand in which contexts they will retrieve the corresponding knowledge and competences, which problems they will solve with them, which challenges they will overcome with them or in which fields of practice they can move successfully with them. This closes the circle to the course mentioned at the beginning, in which students vision their dream jobs.

Furthermore, learning requires a certain basic disposition on the part of the learners as well as a corresponding learning atmosphere. The best learning results are achieved when people enjoy what they are doing. The more enthusiastic the learners are about their choice of subject and the more the teaching staff care about their subjects, their methods or their implementation and the teaching-learning processes taking place, the higher the learning

success as a rule. This aspect closes the circle to the course mentioned at the beginning, in which students vision their dream jobs, too.

Finally, knowledge is always action knowledge, so that it should be acquired in the subject matter and rehearsed now in view of the challenges in later professional life.

All these conditions are fulfilled by the form of teaching at university that I described.

c) Building up virtues by studying Church History

However, the fact that students are personally educated is not only due to the didactics. It also has a lot to do with my method of carrying out Church History. For doing Church History I use the academic method of Cultural Science, which provides fitting tools for character education. What does this mean?

I am interested in answering the question why Christians in former times act in certain ways. What motivated them? What was in their mind to take their steps? Why did they decide to act in this way? What were the moral and ethical principles in the background?

Examining the historical sources in this way students are able to change the perspectives permanently. They are able to understand why people act in a specific way and as consequence they learn methods or are competent to understand their opposite in contexts nowadays, too. They outline human interaction, conflict lines and build up their capacity to empathise. And they increase their awareness of cultures unknown to them. These are only a few important skills among many other cognitive, communicative, social, personal, spiritual and emotional ones. To name them all here would simply go too far.

d) The role of the lecturer

However, this kind of university teaching is only possible if lecturers initiate it. They are the ones who initiate and steer the teaching-learning processes. No matter how intrinsically motivated students may be. If there is no space for them to develop, their motivation will dissipate.

At the same time, students must be seen as learning personalities with individual competences and specific assets. They are the starting point of any educational or didactic consideration. In this perspective, essential requirements must be taken into account to enable the individual to freely develop their personality.

In consequence, professors at university have to become companions, mentors, educators, i.e., people who support their educational and developmental process and introduce them to the relevant specialist knowledge and value system. So, teachers must not only be competent subject facilitators, but also excellent leaders with the duty to accompany. Along with this, students no longer are consumers but producers of knowledge and competences. Academic studies are no longer an end in themselves (seen from the old content-related perspective) but change themselves to create the context of the self-development of students.

e) What students learn for the future profession

Studying at university like this, the joint learning and research – combining neuro-didactic principles with the hermeneutics of Church History against the backdrop of the ideal of Catholic education – finally leads to the fact that students acquire various cognitive, communicative, social and personal, emotional and spiritual skills. The crucial point is students develop virtues and increase their own talents. They have formed their personality, formed virtues and strengthened their characters.

With all this, students have internalised that they are the main actors, who shape educational processes and first and foremost, that they are responsible for their successful educational process. Moreover, they have internalised the pedagogical and anthropological groundings in the form of a Catholic pedagogy and have changed their image of man and their idea of role models. They know that an image of God appears in them and in the other person. And they are enabled to see their Christian responsibility for the challenging tasks in the world. Consequently, they are able to cope with uncertainties and to answer the challenges of the age of VUCA as well as they are focused on helping communities flourish. All in all, a comprehensive change of attitude has taken place.

Equipped with a broad competence profile and internalised virtues, they naturally apply this way of learning and working in their everyday professional life after finishing their studies. The reason is that they have personally experienced how much they have gained in knowledge and competences via this method, how much fun this is and how much it encourages themselves and others. They have repeatedly experienced how learning and working can be done when it is done cooperatively, collaboratively, and self-determined. Consequently, they treat their students, their employees and their bosses with respect and

care and create a learning and working space that enables personality formation and virtue formation. With their way of acting and thinking, with their way of being, they are role models for others, so that the system is perpetuated.

4. Views on implementation and ideas of networking – some spotlights

The described concept of character and virtue education cannot only be applied at universities. It is transferable to all areas of church and society. First of all, it can also be used in primary and secondary schools. The same applies to apprenticeship training, second-chance education programmes (zweiter Bildungsweg), and continuing vocational education and further training. Additionally, it can also be used in the world of work and in voluntary work, but also in the area of private life, in hobbies. It is a concept of life, so to speak. It demonstrates one way of dealing with the challenges of our time. Indeed, it shows how character education can be taught in every lecture, in schools, and at universities, and other educational institutions, so that students leave as excellently educated personalities and leaders. Educated in this way, they can face the future with resilience in their working and private lives and shape our society in a positive way. It also suggests how it can be adapted to the world of work with small changes. In this respect, it is open to all existing programmes in these areas.

In our project, we work with several institutions and have set up courses and programmes. For example, we do teacher training, training for trainers, courses for students and employees, etc. It would be interesting to exchange with other projects, because it would be important to know what specific concepts exist elsewhere and how they are used. In this way, one can compare, learn from each other, and achieve synergy effects.

5. Literature for further reading, selection:

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