

# Cultivating Virtues through an Experiential Learning Activity among Senior High School Students in Iloilo City

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## ABSTRACT

Education should not only seek to strengthen the intellect but should also aim to build character. In the Philippines, character education is an integral part of the curriculum. This study sought to contribute to the program's pedagogical framework by advocating an experiential learning approach to character development, specifically in the cultivation of virtues. The Aristotelian concept of virtue development and the experiential approach to learning were the frameworks utilized to guide this study. The participants were thirty-five senior high school students at the University of the Philippines Visayas. The learning experience utilized was a one-month virtue challenge, wherein students were asked to identify virtues that they would want to start to cultivate within the context of their everyday life. An experiential learning reflection guide was used for their narratives which were thematically analyzed using an inductive method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data gathered included six virtues that the participants personally chose to cultivate, namely, *thriftiness, industry, keeping healthy, self-reflection, joyfulness, and propriety, along with their corresponding activities*; related virtues also emerged parallel to the six; challenges and strategies were also identified, and some key learning points. The study concluded that learning which included character development was a result of personal choice and that experiential learning was a necessary component in its process. Although the activity was classroom simulated, the experience and struggle were real; therefore, meaningful for the students. The study recommends for a pedagogical innovation in character education initiatives specifically in the creation of relevant learning spaces anchored on student reality.

Keywords: experiential learning, moral development, character education, virtues

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## INTRODUCTION

Education should not only seek to strengthen the intellect but should also aim to build character. To this end, character development has become a primary concern among schools. In the Philippines, character education has been an integral part of the curriculum and is well-supported by government policies. Both the 1935 and 1973 Philippine Constitutions have mandated that "all educational institutions shall aim to develop moral character, [and] personal discipline..."; likewise, the 1987 Constitution has explicitly stated in Article XIV, Section 3.2 that schools should "strengthen ethical and spiritual values, develop moral character and personal discipline" (Quisumbing, 1994). Recently, the revival of Good Manners and Right Conduct and Values Education subjects was signed

on June 5, 2020 as Republic Act 11476 otherwise known as the GMRC and Values Education Act. Such Act also conveyed the same message.

Throughout the years, new methodologies and initiatives have been tested and implemented in order to intensify and reinforce character building programs. Yet in spite of continued government support and the dedicated and concerted efforts in schools towards character building, moral decline still seemed to be evident, both in and outside academic institutions. Balbuena & Lamela (2015) cited in their literature review a number of studies conducted by local researchers on the prevalence of academic misconduct among Filipino students, with

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cheating being the most common; notably cited were studies by Abrantes (1984), Baillo (2000), Binuya (1988), Moco (2008), Koo (1990), Resurrection (2012) and Reyes (1998). Cordero (2013) likewise maintained in his study the prevailing moral decline among teenagers in Philippine society. In the United States, Lickona (1992), in his book titled *Educating for Character*, also captured a number of researches depicting troubling trends among the American youth, such as, violence and vandalism, stealing, cheating, disrespect for authority, peer cruelty, bigotry, bad language, sexual promiscuity and abuse, increasing self-centeredness and declining civic responsibility, and self-destructive behavior. Among Filipino youth, such trends too seemed to be apparent. The assertion therefore that character development initiatives maintained by both private and public schools are lacking in strategy may be founded.

This study posits that one of the factors that the lack of success in character education programs is the highly teacher-centered and transmittal-type pedagogical framework. Such framework lacked student voice. The teacher is the main factor in infusing desirable attitudes and habits (Quisumbing, 1994). This researcher, however, concurs with the recommendation of Balbuena and Lamela (2015) that one way to improve character development and ease academic dishonesty is to employ a “participatory approach” to character formation. A character education program is believed to be effective when it regards students as partners in their own education, capable of thinking and making decisions relative to their personal growth, not as passive recipients of the program. To this end, this study seeks to advocate an experiential learning approach to character development among senior high school students.

Experiential learning is defined as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb & Kolb, 2011). Itin (1999) notes that among the seven models that he has studied experiential learning promotes actions that generate some form of experience, encourages reflection of the individual on his/her particular actions and experiences, integrates concepts and insights learned, and applies this new knowledge to future actions and experiences. In this study, experiential learning includes moral learning spaces wherein students personally determine which activities they want to engage in in cultivating a virtue. This study does not claim that experiential learning will develop virtues in students. It argues, on the other hand, that

experiential learning is the starting point in cultivating virtues.

The term character building or development used herein draws no distinction with the constructs of moral education, values education, character formation, or character education. All these purport to have the students’ moral growth as their goal. Student moral growth refers to the building of specific virtues directly chosen or determined by the students themselves and performed within the context of their day to day activities. The study of MacIntyre (1981) defines virtue as “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable [individuals] to achieve those goods which are internal to practices” [such as being a student] (cited by McCloskey, 2006). Cultivating virtues in this study, therefore, refers to specific moral virtues that students deliberately determine as necessary in their moral growth. They continue to learn about and practice such virtues in their everyday undertakings, thereby enabling them to become better persons. Developing virtues directly requires a hands-on, experiential approach. It is like learning how to drive a car. One does not learn driving by just memorizing the details, but rather one has to actually get in the car and drive.

This study intended to help enrich character development strategy in the classroom through different interventions, ranging from stories, class debates, discussions, role plays, emulation, and modelling. It sought to add to existing strategies of student-led experiential activity, whereby students were given “opportune moments” (Esteban, 2013) to hold the reins in their own moral growth.

The objectives of this study were to describe the experiences of thirty-five senior high school students at the University of the Philippines Visayas in doing a one-month virtue challenge learning activity, as well as to raise awareness on the cultivation of virtues. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Which virtues did the students choose to develop in the month-long virtue challenge learning activity, and the corresponding activities to show it?
2. Were there related virtues that emerged on top of the virtues that they sought to develop? What were these?

3. What difficulties or challenges did the students encounter?
4. What strategies did they employ in order to overcome the challenges?
5. What insight or learning surfaced from their experience?

To gather pertinent data, student narratives were collected after the activity and thematically analyzed using an inductive method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An experiential learning reflection guide was used for the narratives.

This study did not intend to include identifying distinct stages in cultivating the virtues, but rather to simply describe student experiences that could provide insight to teachers in considering a student-led experiential learning activity in cultivating the virtues. It also did not expect students to have the virtues habituated in a month as habituation would take a much longer period of time. Lastly, this study was not intended to argue against current strategies as each one carried its own merit.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study hinges on two perspectives: the Aristotelian concept of virtue development and the experiential approach to learning.

According to Aristotle, virtues are of two kinds - intellectual and moral. The former is formed and enhanced through earnest study and application; the latter through constant practice and habituation (Rackman, ed., 1934). This study focuses on moral virtues and its development. Moral virtues or moral habits, which, as the nature of habits goes, are actions that persons incessantly and repeatedly do in a certain situation until they occur naturally or become second-nature to the person. But unlike other mechanically habituated actions such as brushing the teeth or doing the laundry, virtues are not blindly nor thoughtlessly practiced. It is a conscious effort. The intellect is at work assessing and judging context, circumstances and outcomes. Jimenez (2016), citing Burnyeat 1980, Sherman 1989, Broadie 1991, Kraut 2012, to name a few, held that practicing or habituating the virtues "is not blind, mindless training, but instead involves from the start the cultivation of the learners' perceptive and critical powers". For instance, if one wants to develop

the virtue of moderation, then one has to decide an activity or series of actions, as for example, eating healthy wherein one has to constantly decide which food to eat and avoid, and overcoming challenges. This undertaking, which Sherman (1989) calls "critical habituation", requires thinking, deliberating, and willing even as they become habits of character. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2, asserts that "our moral dispositions are formed as a result of the corresponding activities. Hence it is incumbent on us to control the character of our activities, since on the quality of these depends the quality of our dispositions" (Rackman, ed., 1934). The goal of cultivating the virtues is to help propel the person towards self-development or flourishing.

### *Cultivating the Virtues Through an Experiential Approach to Learning*

In a dialogue written by Plato titled Meno (Jowett, 2008), the character Meno asked Socrates if virtue can be taught. Today, one might consider this question as merely peripheral and clichéd but somehow when students are asked what attributes they find noteworthy and enduring in their teachers, parents or society at large, answers would include integrity, honesty, loyalty, respectfulness, kindness, and the likes; similarly, when crafting a school's vision-mission, one would naturally start with a list of virtues or values; showing that virtue as a quality and concept never lost its relevance and essence. It was valid yesterday, today, and will still be valid tomorrow. Virtuous actions remained to be desired. For decades, amidst criticisms, character education proponents, to name a few, had done considerable research on this topic in order to testify and validate that indeed virtue could be taught (Esteban, 2013; Lickona, 1991; Lickona and Davidson, 2005; Damon, 2005; Starratt, 2005; Crisp, 2003; Hutcheon, 1999; Gauld, 1995; Murphy, 1998). Thus, the questions "How may teachers facilitate the teaching and learning of moral virtues? and How may teachers encourage students to live the virtues?" could be advanced by adding student voice in the existing array of strategies, allowing students to take the lead in their own moral development. "Character education is entwined throughout the curriculum by providing learning environments" (Anderson, 2000 cited by Protz, 2013) or beyond the classroom experiences that could facilitate moral growth.

In a paper by Cannon, et al (2016), the authors argued that conventional method of teaching values

(and virtues) were not as effective as when students personally experience the process themselves. "Values (and virtues) are the product of personal experience, a co-creative process in which students test the ideas to which they are exposed against their own sense of what is intuitively right and their own experience with what appears to produce satisfying results in practical decision-making situations." (Hyland, 1996 cited by Cannon, et al, 2016)

This study believes in the importance of experience and student voice in cultivating moral virtues. Learning by doing self-propelled activities is an empowering learning approach; and this is exactly what cultivating the virtues aims: for students to potentially become self-empowered individuals. When one directs his or her own learning, it becomes significant, integral, and life-long as learners "develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking" (Lewis & Williams, 1994 cited by Schwartz, 2012).

Dewey (1933), however, stressed that experience alone "is not always educative" (cited by Young, et al, 2008). When experiential learning activities are not well-planned and do not connect the concepts being taught in the curriculum with student reality, "experiential learning is likely to be a risky proposition" (Eisenstein and Hutchinson, 2006 cited by Young, et al, 2008). Learning to be meaningful must be relevant to the students' "life space" (Lewin in Bigge, 1982), that is, reflective of their personal history, context, and everyday struggles. It is only when students are able to reflect and connect what is being taught in class to their everyday reality that experiential learning becomes purposeful and not superficial. While character education aims to help students lead an integral life, it would be lacking without considering their narratives and the struggles that they undergo as they try to live the virtues (Sanderse, 2014). After all, context drives meaning into experiences.

To sum, experiential learning allows students an opportunity to freely immerse into the real world and directly experience the virtue under study. Being able to reflect on their experience and the process of how they arrived at it allows them to realize the worthiness of their experience: that they are free to modify or change goals, values and belief systems halfway through; that they can orchestrate their own learning by playing an active role in decision-making. "When educators [therefore] utilize experiential learning..., teachers have the opportunity to present the students with activities... that lead to higher

level thinking" (Considine, 2014). As Miller (2017) succinctly puts it, "any experience or accumulation of experiences has the potential to induce a personal moral transformation". The constant practice of moral virtues makes one "learn to perceive things correctly through more nuanced patterns of seeing", thereby making one become more responsible as "experience gives (one) an eye" (Kristjánsson, 2006). Experiential learning therefore is one of the relevant techniques in education that can be used in the field of moral education, specifically in the cultivation of virtues.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Course context*

Initiatives at cultivating the virtues is a shared responsibility. It has to be purposeful and sustained rather than random or occasional because moral virtues take time and considerable effort to develop; it is a cumulative process (Esteban, 2013). Although moral development is embedded in all subject areas, this study focuses on the subject, The Philosophy of the Human Person, because not only is the researcher also the subject teacher but also because this researcher believes that the course, by virtue of its subject matter, is a viable venue to introduce an experiential learning activity that promotes the cultivation of virtues among the senior high school students.

The Philosophy of the Human Person is offered in the first semester of the Grade 12 curriculum at the University of the Philippines Visayas. The course introduces philosophy in brief and discusses essential truths about human nature from the perspectives of western and eastern philosophers. It also discusses rights and duties of an individual, and the importance of character. The teacher-researcher proposes to extend the subject's pedagogical framework to include an experiential learning component geared towards developing the virtues by connecting the subject to student present reality.

### *Participants of the Study*

The participants of this study were thirty-five Grade 12 students (five males and 30 females) who belonged to the Accounting and Business Management (ABM) stream. Since this was a class activity, everyone were enjoined to participate. At the onset of the activity, the students were consulted if they were willing to have their narratives used as testimonies to support a research on the value



of experiential learning. The teacher-researcher explained to them that non-participation would not result in a bias against their grade; and participation would not bear additional points either. Grading was not based on the quality of their narratives but rather on the technical aspect of writing reflection papers. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity as codes would be used instead of their names. After the research mechanics were explained to them, everyone gave their consent and signed a consent form, with a proviso that they could refuse anytime and withdraw their work if they didn't feel like participating in this research. Parental consent was sought for students with age below eighteen.

#### *Procedure and analysis of the experiential learning activity*

The experiential learning activity was scheduled to run for one month in the middle of the first semester. It was called a Virtue Challenge. Students were asked to choose a virtue that they would want to start to cultivate. The challenge was to actualize the virtues in their day to day activities for thirty days, ideally without fail. Should they fail for whatever reason, they were to start anew and refresh counting day one until they were able to complete thirty days. Students were encouraged to utilize an activity that was accessible to them and within the bounds of their routine. This was to make them realize that building virtues did not require doing something out of the ordinary or something that would take them away from their routine. After all, building virtues was embedded in day to day affairs. A three-week period was given to them after the one-month challenge in order to compose their written narratives. An experiential learning reflection guide was used for their reflection paper, which intended to capture accounts of their personal journey and to detail significant impressions, realizations, insights, and learning. The reflection guide contained three parts. The first part asked them to identify the virtue that they wanted to develop during the month, and, after completing the 30-day activity, to narrate their experience. Part two was an analysis of the problems and challenges that they encountered, and their points of learning. Part three focused on how certain knowledge, attitude, and skills learned can be applied to other areas of their life. A two item checklist asking whether they were still doing the challenge after the activity had ended, or not, was provided at the end of the reflection guide. Twenty-three students answered that they were still doing the challenge. Somehow this proved that most didn't regard this activity as merely

a class requirement to be fulfilled, but something of a higher purpose.

After the individual reflection papers were collected, they were thematically analyzed following an inductive process, wherein codes and themes were derived out of the details of their written accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Student names were omitted and coded as "Participant-1 to 35 or P-1 to 35".

The codes gathered from the written accounts were labelled as, 1) "Actions" corresponding to a particular virtue; these actions were then categorized into money-saving-related actions, school-related, health-related, and self-related actions; specific activities corresponding to the categories were then noted. 2) "Difficulties Met" for each action, which were particular lines that expressed a struggle for each category in #1; 3) "Counter-moves", which were detailed accounts of how they countered difficulties met. This contained direct participant quotes. 4) "Reflections", which were categorized into "Changes in perspective, attitude" and "Resolves"; these were specific entries that contained afterthought of the month long challenge; virtues mentioned were noted. Themes derived were the following: virtues being cultivated, related virtues, challenges met, strategies to counter the challenges, and personal insight and knowledge gained.

## **RESULTS**

The following section presents answers to the research questions, as follows, which virtues the students choose to develop in the month-long virtue challenge learning activity and their corresponding activities, what related virtues emerged, the challenges encountered and strategies employed in order to overcome the challenges, and insights gained from the activity.

### *1. Which virtues did the students choose to develop in the month-long virtue challenge learning, and the corresponding activities?*

In the course of the activity, six virtues emerged that students chose to develop within the context of their present reality, namely, thriftiness, industry, keeping healthy, self-reflection, joyfulness, and propriety. Table 1 reflects these virtues along with their corresponding activities, which are part of their everyday life as senior high school students.

**Table 1.** Virtues that students choose to cultivate within the context of their present reality and the corresponding activities

Virtues Being Cultivated	Corresponding Activities	N=35
Thriftiness	Saving money, spending wisely	17
Industry	Establishing good study habits, Doing household chores	6
Keeping healthy	Eating healthy food, exercising, and avoiding unhealthy drinks	5
Self-Reflection	Reflecting on the day's happening by keeping a journal and reading	3
Joyfulness	Making five people happy each day, showing parental affection	2
Propriety	Refraining from using obscene language	2

2. Were there related virtues that emerged on top of the virtues that they sought to develop? What were these?

Related virtues have also emerged from the narratives in addition to the six as shown in Table 2, proving that indeed the practice of one virtue could potentially usher in the practice of more. The last column in the table below shows the top three related virtues frequently mentioned.

3. What difficulties or challenges did the students encounter?

Cultivating the virtues for the students was not an easy endeavor. It came with a number of difficulties and challenges. In their narratives, temptation and lack of self-control were the most pervasive challenges that the students encountered. For instance, in cultivating the virtue of thriftiness, Participant 3 reported being tempted many times to indulge in impulsive buying.

**Table 2.** Virtues related to the ones being cultivated, including the top three frequently mentioned

Virtues Being Cultivated	Related Virtues	Top 3 Related Virtues
Thriftiness	patience, discipline, optimism, courage, determination, consistency, diligence, creativity, gratefulness	Discipline (27 mentions)  Determination (13 mentions)
Industry	discipline, patience, determination, diligence, punctuality	Diligence (10 mentions)

Table 2 continued

Virtues being cultivated	Related virtues	Top 3 Related virtues
Keeping healthy	Consistency, discipline, diligence, patience, honesty, determination, optimism, focus, commitment	
Self-Reflection	Creativity, discipline	
Joyfulness	Openness, consideration	
Propriety	Discipline, diligence, determination, consideration	

*“... I became an impulsive buyer [on] Shopee... I had no more control of my fingers picking out money from my wallet... nor my thumb from pressing “buy now” ... Yes, the virtue challenge was always in mind, but the eagerness of buying stuff I see on “SALE”, I just can’t help it!”*

Participant 16 likewise shared the difficulty in keeping a healthy lifestyle because friends and family outright tempted her and fueled her desire for carbonated drinks.

*“I was tempted to drink soft drinks because ... eating is not that satisfying without drinking a glass of iced Coca-cola. My friends tempted me saying that my teacher wouldn’t know if I will cheat. ... I have been tempted countless times. ... my friends and family encouraged me to drink soft drinks because for them, why restrain myself from drinking if I wanted to. Seeing my classmates drink also made me want to. These problems occurred again and again ...”*

In establishing good study habits, Participant 4 disclosed a lack of self-control:

*“One of the major challenges that I faced was my uncontrollable urge to procrastinate”.*

In cultivating the virtue of propriety or good manners, Participant 5 tried to steer away from vulgarity but found the effort frustrating because,

*“[Being] with people who curse a lot is a problem because I tend to go with them, I follow their traits and I couldn’t stop myself [from cursing]”.*

**4. What strategies did they employ in order to overcome the challenges?**

Teenage years come rife with challenges and changes in life; but at the same time abound with opportunities for self-growth. Results in this study (Table 3) showed how participants tried to overcome temptation and lack of self-control that they encountered during the month-long virtue challenge.

**5. What insight or learning surfaced from this experience?**

Insight and meaningful learning can be derived from the teaching-learning process when students are able to connect the subjects being taught in school with their day to day reality. Experiential learning with good effects can prompt a positive shift in thought patterns and attitude that can lead to an auspicious mindset; thereby, reinforcing character development,

**Table 3.** Strategies employed by participants to overcome temptation and to build self-control

Strategies employed to overcome temptation	Participant quotes
1. Focus on self-development goals	<i>"I faced uncontrollable urge to procrastinate. [So] for one month, I aimed to develop [time-management] skills... to improve myself". (P-4)</i>
2. Draw inspiration and motivation from little wins	<i>"Every time temptation hit me, I remember those times I have already restrained drinking soft drinks ... now is not the time to break this chain" (P-16).</i>
3. Say no to friends	<i>"I started to say NO and pass on food trips and "gala" with friends. (P-23)</i>
4. Put aside some money and store savings in earnest	<i>"... to cope with (temptation), I made sure to store my savings on a tightly packed container so that the money won't be that easily accessible [and] a reminder to contain myself." (P-2)</i>
5. Buy only essential things	<i>... I controlled impulsive buying, and purchasing unnecessary things". (P-23)</i>
6. Control the senses	<i>"...to avoid [Coca-cola], I choose cold water instead, and avoid looking at refrigerators or ice boxes to resist temptations". (P-3)</i>
7. Use alternatives, such as code-switching and object replacement	<i>"Instead of saying a bad word, I would use an alternative word ... instead of "shit," I would say "shells." (P-25)</i>

as seen in this statement:

*"... the hardest to do is to keep myself motivated and inspired. At first, I was so full of confidence. But as days come, [I] question: Is this challenge really worth completing? I mean I can cheat anytime and anywhere and no one would know. My teacher wouldn't even know if I cheated. (But) what I did was put in mind that I am doing this challenge not for anybody nor for my teacher ... not for the sake of passing a requirement and getting a grade. I am doing this for myself ... for my health, so cheating on this challenge is also like cheating on myself." (P-16)*

Realizing the key role of discipline not only

in cultivating the virtues, but also in other areas in life, was a significant learning point for most of the participants, as can be noted in these accounts:

*"... I thought discipline was not really a big deal, but when I applied it to this challenge I have proven that it was a great factor ... And it's not only applicable in this matter [saving money] but also to other things" (P-8),*

and Participant 25, who strove to increase fortitude in her resolve to cultivate the virtue of propriety, shared that,

*"Even after the challenge was over, I am still doing the no-cursing activity. But just like they say, old habits die hard. I cursed for the first time*



*after [completing the challenge]. It's like myself missing cursing. My mouth became a cursing machine again and I couldn't help but to curse every single time. But what I observe about myself was that ...I started becoming sensitive of my actions...Currently, I am doing the challenge (all over) again to discipline myself."*

Self-awareness and sensitivity towards others, i.e. being mindful of ones' actions and their effect on others, were also among the participants' learning curve. For instance,

*"I started becoming sensitive of my actions..."* (P-25), or

*"I came to know which aspects of my personality needs improvement, and that is determination and consistency. I can improve on these areas to achieve bigger things"* (P-10), and

*"I am more careful in everything I say and do because it may hurt other people's feelings. I became more sensitive on what other people feel"* (P-6).

Furthermore, allowing students to experience their own learning made them realize the relevance of virtues in many aspects of their life, as depicted in the following narratives:

*"This project is not just merely for the sake of my grade and not because this is a requirement for our Philosophy class but I find this a stepping stone to exercise thriftiness"* (P-9), or

*"I have learned to be optimistic about my goals. [D]eveloping optimism would help me in other areas like my academics. Being in the University of the Philippines ... and having a negative mindset would definitely not do you any good"* (P-17), and

*"I learned that it is okay to create mistakes because mistakes are made to be lessons in our life"* (P-2).

The results above have shown that in undergoing this experiential learning approach in the cultivation of moral virtues, students were able to derive particular learning points that otherwise they would not have realized if learning remained passive.

## DISCUSSION

In a teacher-centered moral development framework such as the Values Education program of the Department of Education, a ready-made list of virtues "which learners are hoped to internalize and practice" are provided for teachers to choose from, "to emphasize, reinforce or change, when it is perceived necessary and beneficial to do so" (Quisumbing, 1994). However, as could be gleaned from Table 1, students were very much capable of generating their own virtues - virtues that they considered relevant and important to their flourishing. It could be noted too that related virtues emerged as well (Table 2), proving that virtues are unified. In using student experiences, a Values Education teacher could use this as a starting point or springboard to compose a list of virtues. For instance, the virtue of thriftiness was one of the values that teachers were mandated to "inculcate" among Filipino students (Quisumbing, 1994). In Table 1, thriftiness was among the virtues that the participants chose to cultivate, along with keeping healthy, which was also listed in the DECS values development program as "physical fitness" (DO No.6, s1988).

Virtues have a unitive character, which means that practicing one virtue could potentially usher in the practice of more. For instance, the Filipino *utang na loob* (debt of good will) is prompted by the virtues of charity, love, sympathy (de Castro, 1998), and understood in the Filipino context of justice, and harmony (Cleofas, 2020). In addition, Wolf (2007) points out that "one cannot be truly courageous unless one is also just; one cannot be truly just unless one is also generous, as well as temperate, magnanimous, truthful, friendly, witty, and so on". Penner (1973, in Wolf 2007) adds that "... the virtues are so integrated with each other that a person cannot have one virtue without having ... others". This study validates this assertion. Table 2 shows related virtues that emerged along with the virtues being cultivated by the students proving the unitive character of the virtues. For example, in cultivating the virtue of thriftiness, other virtues are being developed as well such as patience, discipline, optimism, courage, determination, consistency, diligence, creativity, and gratefulness. The same goes with the virtues of industry, keeping healthy, self-reflection, joyfulness, and propriety, together with their related virtues.

This researcher would like to propose, therefore, that instead of providing a ready-made list of virtues

for students to “internalize and practice”, the reverse could be done by allowing them to choose the virtues that they would want to develop for their own flourishing. By this, ownership of the initiative and its outcome would be transferred to the students, giving them the opportunity to take charge of their own moral development. In effect, this would make learning more personal and meaningful for them. The teacher’s role would be to complement the process by providing additional learning activities for a deeper grasp of the virtue being studied.

It is worthy to note however that virtue development does not come easy and does not happen overnight. There are bound to be challenges and difficulties along the way as experienced by the participants in this study. For instance, temptation and lack of self-control were considered by the majority as hardest to overcome. Both concepts are actually inherently connected: weak or lack of self-control may make one open or vulnerable to temptation. Temptation is defined in Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “the act of tempting or the state of being tempted especially to evil”; and its root word “tempt” means: “entice or attempt to entice (someone) to do or acquire something that they find attractive but know to be wrong or not beneficial”. In another entry, it says, “tempt implies the presenting of an attraction so strong that it overcomes the restraints of conscience or better judgment”. Examples are manifested in statements such as,

*“My friends tempted me saying that my teacher wouldn’t know if I will cheat. ... I have been tempted countless times. ...” (P-16).*

Or Participant-3 on impulsive buying:

*“I had no more control of my fingers picking out money from my wallet... nor my thumb from pressing “buy now”... the eagerness of buying stuff I see on “SALE”, I just can’t help it!”*

These definitions show temptation as having negatives effects and adversarial to character development.

In this study, however, temptation, as a challenge encountered by the participants, offers three advantages. One, the teacher, having gained personal knowledge of it, can provide relevant support to the students as they navigate through this predicament. Two, as students confront temptation, they are also developing allied virtues such as courage, patience, determination, discipline, and temperance - strengthening and adding to the other

virtues being cultivated. Three, it reinforces the value of experiential learning as an approach to character education.

In a study done by Park (2016) in overcoming temptation, the author asserted that one technique was to “downplay” the effects of giving in to temptation and to bolster the benefits of one’s goal. Interestingly, some participants also utilized a strategy along this line in facing temptation (Table 3). For instance, they would think of the long-term benefits of a healthy lifestyle over the momentary visceral satisfaction of a soft drink, or reflect on the advantages of having time management skills on their academics, or the comfort of having money saved for future needs. Participant 16 capped it with this reflection:

*“Is this challenge really worth completing? I mean I can cheat anytime and anywhere and no one would know. My teacher wouldn’t even know if I cheated. (But) what I did was put in mind that I am doing this challenge not for anybody nor for my teacher ... not for the sake of passing a requirement and getting a grade. I am doing this for myself ... for my health, so cheating on this challenge is also like cheating on myself.”*

The importance of focusing on one’s goals in order “to achieve bigger things” (using the words of P-10) was also beneficial in handling temptation and strengthening self-control. On the other hand, directly “saying no to friends” could be inferred as an act of courage since at this stage of development, friends were considered as a vital part of teenage life. The same could be said of “controlling the senses” in order to avoid certain foods. What teenager would deliberately avoid food? - in this study, a teenager with a goal. Teachers, therefore, could benefit in acknowledging that students of this age are really quite able to think for themselves and could decide on what they believe is good for them, i.e., to creatively and determinedly plan a course of action on how to circumvent being tempted, while realizing the need for self-control, and to toughen up. Teachers then on their part could make the necessary adjustment in their curriculum and teaching strategy.

It could further be posited that providing real-world experiences to students as part of a teaching-learning package was in fact propitious and transformative as could be gleaned from the insights shared above (See Results, question 5). This paradigm shift in thinking and attitude enabled students to be critical in analyzing, reflecting, and connecting the things they

learned to their context. It profoundly gave them an “eye” or a personal understanding that cultivating the virtues was essential but not an easy task. It involved determination, dedication, diligence, and a lot more. Even the defeats and mistakes encountered made sense:

*“it is okay to create mistakes because mistakes are made to be lessons in our life” (P-2).*

The participants did learn that while it was important to acknowledge the struggle, it was equally important to take it easy on ones self, to maintain a cheerful disposition or

*“to be optimistic about [ones] goals” (P-17),*

and to start the challenge all over again when necessary. This experiential learning activity had created an “opportuned moment” for them to validate the importance of virtues to their everyday undertakings, to their practice, to their profession, and eventually to their success in life.

Lastly, this student-centered learning strategy was in support of the students’ stage of development as adolescents. This stage is characterized by the students’ need to assert independence and freedom, to prove oneself, to be acknowledged by others as capable of making their own decisions, and take responsibility for the outcomes of their choices (Esteban, 2013). They need to feel worthy of trust. As Participant 1 succinctly expressed:

*“[In doing this activity,] I learned that I am able to do things on my own”.*

It could be said, therefore, that students come to class, not as “empty vessels to be filled” with teacher-generated list of values, but rather as thinking, feeling, and determining partners in their own moral growth.

In sum, this activity may be classroom simulated, but the virtues started, the challenges encountered and lessons learned were very real.

## CONCLUSION

In order to achieve a meaningful character development program such as cultivating the moral virtues, pedagogical frameworks should include direct student participation, wherein students are given relevant learning spaces anchored on their present reality. As shown and discussed in this study, by allowing students to participate in their own moral growth, i.e., to personally choose their own

virtues and activities, learning became relevant and therefore meaningful to them. While their journey to building character and achieving personal excellence was beset by uncertainties, personal weaknesses, self-doubts, and temptations, the participants were able to hurdle the thirty-day experiential learning activity with profound insights and learning. As can be gathered in the data above, participants’ generation of new knowledge, attitude and behavior rested on actively participating in their own learning process; freely choosing their own goals and strategies while doing reflective thinking and critical analysis of their efforts in progress, eventually deriving meaning out of these experiences. Moreover, this experiential learning activity proved to be a powerful vehicle for students to accept more responsibility for their personal growth. Taking charge of their own learning was an empowering experience – something that students could derive inspiration, understanding, and confidence in facing life’s challenges. Indeed, building character starts with one’s choices and actions that are woven in the everyday details of life and seen as a person’s “character in action” (The CEFEL, 2017).

Efforts, therefore, in character education do not have to operate outside the bounds of the curriculum because it is already embedded within that structure. Through an innovative and interdisciplinary approach to curriculum planning, academic personnel can synchronize efforts in order to advance a holistic educational plan that takes into account the different areas of human development – an initiative that could be the subject of future research. After all, if schools aim to produce men and women of character, moral development efforts should be given as much emphasis and importance as that of reading, writing, and arithmetic. In the end, “... all authentic learning is inextricably bound up with learning for living the moral life” (Lovat, 2007).

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