

Reframing Virtues for Lifelong Learning

What kind of people do I want my students to become? What are the highest values and ideals for living individually and in society? These are questions that take us to the heart of Howard Gardner's curriculum inquiry in *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed*. Gardner's perspective takes the focus off the method or delivery of a certain skill set or craft and focuses on the overall goal of the process of learning—what should we learn and why should we learn it? Howard argues, if truth, beauty, and goodness don't flow out of the learning experience we have missed the main event of education. Using these virtues as the basic filter for curriculum inquiry provides opportunity for societal progress and personal development. Gardner argues even in postmodern thought and the dominant media influence, curriculum must be built upon these virtues to instill enduring impact for learning throughout our lives.

The first virtue, *truth*, Gardner asserts that education currently puts a majority of resource into implementing curriculum according to this virtue. The information dispensed from expert to student must be verifiable and, therefore, reliable. He further discusses the problem of reliability in a culture that tends to present mountains of subjective, or even slanted, material. Gardner pointedly warns, "In a culture where anything goes, nothing endures." A student recently asked for help editing a research paper and one of their primary sources was from Facebook. In this case, Gardner would challenge the student to verify their information through peer-reviewed research from authoritative sources. When settling on what is true, students must be guided along a journey, or a search, to uncover the unknown. Gardner affirms how certainty is elusive, but there are practical steps to getting closer to it. Thus, curriculum is on its way to an enduring impact when students understand how to decipher truth from the information overload and, through reason and evidence, come to a logical conclusion.

When discussing *beauty*, Gardner stresses the importance of exposure to multiple forms and varieties of works of art. As students discover what they find beautiful, they are likely to return to experience that beauty repeatedly and remember the content vividly. An Algebra

teacher spends time introducing the historic authority behind the theorems taught in a unit (truth). Then applying this truth to solve a complex equation, she shows how the different theorems work together to help find the value of the unknown variable. There is tension felt in the struggle of solving the problem, but relief when the facts line up and give a solution—the truth has set you free! After the problem is solved, the teacher stands back and looks at the whole of the problem, the work it took to solve it, and in the relief of the result and says, “*That is a sexy math problem!*” Here a teacher evokes students’ sense of beauty in an instance where beauty is not usually introduced. This can help a student see the symmetry and balance in forms other than painting, pottery, or poetry. Gardner would applaud this teacher in bringing the beauty of truth to her students. An enduring impact of this lesson may be to appreciate and return to the beauty that can be discovered rather than just plainly seen.

Gardner’s sequence in his inquiry of the virtues is pertinent as they build upon one another and culminate in *goodness*—the point of the whole process. To answer the questions posed in the first paragraph, we want our students, throughout their lives, to *be good* and *do good*. Gardner breaks down the DNA of good work in three components: *excellence*, *ethics*, and *engagement*. He then shows how each of the virtues, truth, beauty, and goodness, tie into these three components. This is a compelling analogy for the interrelatedness of the virtues within the expression of goodness at work and personally. Thus, according to Gardner, goodness is the “main event” of education, the cumulative enduring impact of curriculum—being a good neighbor and citizen.

Gardner concludes his reframing of the virtues with the enduring result of creating lifelong-learners and the reciprocal nature of learning and modeling as we get older. He speaks to the importance of this through parenting and mentorship in both the development of adults *and* young people through their lives. Adults have the opportunity to impart learning as well as further their own learning through their relationships with young people. With respect to the good, Gardner encourages partnership between young and old. The young bring technical knowledge to the equation, while the old’s experience in navigating ethics can provide the necessary guard rails. Together these groups cultivate a society that is viable with an enduring impact—that is a sexy math problem!