



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

EXEMPLARS WHO INSPIRE INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY

"Mistakes are a fact of life. It is the response to error that counts."

—Nikki Giovanni

OVERVIEW

Students learn about intellectual humility, consider an historian who demonstrated it, and identify ways to practice greater intellectual humility.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help students develop intellectual humility
- Before an exam
- To create a classroom culture where mistakes are welcomed and learning is joyful
- In an introductory unit on intellectual virtues and their importance to thinking and learning

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High school

MATERIALS

- Paper
- Pencil/Pen

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Learn what intellectual humility is and practice identifying when others are displaying it
- Identify ways to practice intellectual humility
- Consider why intellectual humility is important

SEL COMPETENCIES ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Non-Judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Think about someone you know who displays [intellectual humility](#). Consider a person you feel close to and/or with whom you share similar characteristics like age, profession, or personality traits. Respond to the following questions:
 - How does this person demonstrate intellectual humility?
 - How do this person's actions make you feel? Are you encouraged to behave in a similar manner?
 - What are some ways you could practice more intellectual humility?

INSTRUCTIONS

- Introduce students to the concept of [intellectual humility](#). You may use the following description: We practice intellectual humility when we recognize the limits of our knowledge, admit our intellectual mistakes, and value the insight of someone else. Provide students with the following example of someone who demonstrates intellectual humility.
 - Doris Kearns Goodwin is a prominent American historian and Pulitzer Prize winning author. In 1987 she published a book on the family of former U.S. President John F. Kennedy. After the book was released, it was discovered that several passages had apparently been taken from another source without proper attribution. In an article in Time magazine titled "How I Caused that Story," she said the following:

"I am a historian. With the exception of being a wife and mother, it is who I am. And there is nothing I take more seriously ... [N]ot long after the publication of my book *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, I received a communication from author Lynne McTaggart pointing out that

material from her book on Kathleen Kennedy had not been properly attributed. I realized she was right. Though my footnotes repeatedly cited Ms. McTaggart's work, I failed to provide quotation marks for phrases that I had taken verbatim, having assumed that these phrases, drawn from my notes, were my words, not hers. I made the corrected changes ... What made the incident particularly hard for me was the fact that I take great pride in the depth of my research and the extensiveness of my citations. The writing of history is a rich process of building on the work of the past with the hope that others will build on what you have done. Through footnotes you point the way to the future historians. The only protection as a historian is to institute a process of research and writing that minimizes the possibility of error. And that I have tried to do, aided by modern technology, which enables me, having long since moved beyond longhand, to use a computer for both organizing and taking notes. I now rely on a scanner, which reproduces the passages I want to cite, and then I keep my own comments on those books in a separate file so that I will never confuse the two again ... Still, there is no guarantee against error. Should one occur, all I can do, as I did 14 years ago, is to correct it as soon as I possibly can, for my own sake and the sake of history."

- Discuss how Doris displayed intellectual humility. The following are some examples you might point out:
 - Notice the title of the article, "How I Caused that Story." Assuming that Goodwin played a role in writing—or at least endorsed—this title, it illustrates the idea of taking ownership of one's intellectual mistakes. Goodwin identifies herself (not her editors, research assistants, etc.) as the root of the problem.
 - Goodwin's willingness to own her mistake is especially impressive given how deeply she identifies with her role as an historian and the "great pride" she takes in the "depth" of her research and the "extensiveness of [her] citations." These factors must have made it even more difficult for her to go public with her gaffe. However, as someone capable of intellectual humility, Goodwin did not allow her ego to get in the way of acknowledging and expressing regret over her intellectual error.
- Discuss why intellectual humility is important.
- Now, have students write a short reflection on someone they know, who they feel close to, and with whom they share some characteristics (e.g., age, background, or personality) who displays intellectual humility. Have students consider the following questions:
 - How does this person demonstrate intellectual humility? Write about 2-3 different times when this person demonstrated intellectual humility.
 - How do this person's actions make you feel? Are you encouraged to behave in a similar manner?
 - What are some ways you could practice more intellectual humility?
- Have students share their responses out loud.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Consider the responses students gave to the last question in the practice. (What are some ways in which you could practice more intellectual humility?) How might you support your students in realizing such behaviors?

- Have you noticed any changes in your student’s behavior since engaging in this activity?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Philosophers have long endorsed the use of moral exemplars to promote moral character development, and a recent [review](#) of best practices for school-based moral education also highlights the benefit of using stories of moral exemplars to encourage moral character.

[Research](#) shows that stories of extraordinary morality can encourage moral sentiments and motivate individuals to engage in similar behaviors. However, not all moral exemplars have the same impact. A [study](#) found that stories of relevant and attainable moral exemplars, such as peers, were more effective at encouraging college and middle school students to behave similarly when compared to stories of historical moral characters

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Admitting to mistakes and recognizing one’s gaps in understanding can be difficult at times, particularly, in our performance-obsessed culture. For students, such pressures to perform can hinder their learning process. Intellectual humility can help students distance themselves from pure performance goals so that they are better able to focus on intellectual growth. Intellectual humility can help create more welcoming learning environments where students feel safe to ask questions and take more ownership for their learning.

SOURCE

[Cultivating Good Minds: A Philosophical & Practical Guide to Educating for Intellectual Virtues](#) by [Jason Baehr, Ph.D.](#)