



MY COUNTRY, OP-ED

A SPARK can transform teacher, student and community

AUGUST 3, 2015 | MATTHEW BRENNAN | LEAVE A COMMENT



*Lowell High School students and staff visit MIT for the SPARK Youth event and His Holiness the Dalai Lama's visit in late October 2014.*

By Matthew Brennan

Cambridge, MA- Secular values can be a powerful force for change in a community. That's what I learned by attending The Dalai Lama Center for Ethic and Transformative Values Transformative Teachers program and the SPARK Youth event at MIT in 2014. I teach Digital Journalism and English as a Second Language at one of the largest and most diverse schools, Lowell High School in Lowell, MA. So, it's a daunting thought to attempt change in such a large atmosphere. I learned from the teacher training to begin with myself and the classroom.



*Chade Meng-Tan, GoogleEdu's Head of Personal Growth, explained how kindness can be spread through a community by one's simple actions and*



I decided to begin this discussion in my Digital Journalism course, which is ripe with opportunity for talk about values and ethics. My students and I began by looking at the values which influenced our lives and in turn our community. By brainstorming character values at the micro-level as a class and visualizing how we are shaped by a number of common values, we gained a better perspective of the community's shared values. Rather than focusing on the differences portrayed through media, which can shape apathetic attitudes and at times overwhelm common sense, the character value exercises provided a more accurate picture of the shared common values which bring hope to the world. These values don't always sell well in the 24-hour news cycle and are often ignored by global media.

My students and I completed the character value group activity together compiling and comparing the values most influential in their young lives. Students discoursed about the values which they have experienced such as honesty, compassion and responsibility among others. I shared my values of persistence and graciousness bestowed on me by my wife, mother and father. They also reflected upon people in their lives who had demonstrated these values. Students exchanged stories about parents, grandparents, coaches and teachers who exemplified the values. My students were also invited to put their values in action at the SPARK Youth event at MIT where they displayed character value flags, volunteered and listened to his Holiness the Dalai Lama speak about stewardship in the world.

With great enthusiasm the students assisted students from other schools in preparing their own character value flags and in so doing exemplified service to others. These small banners, now displayed at MIT, together represent a great visual reminder of globally shared character values. As a teacher these exercises forced me to think about how to embed character values into journalism curricula and the necessity to exemplify the values myself. Such character value exercises provide substantive opportunities for deeper understanding and application



(<https://lhsdigitalnewspaper.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/dscf0050.jpg>)

*Thai-Chinese violinist, Adrian Anantawan, entertains students and faculty at the SPARK Youth event.*



*Top row of flags display character values from Lowell students*

across curricula and more importantly in our daily interactions. I needed to exemplify them too in my personal and professional life.

In class as students practice digital journalism skills there are ample moments to discuss how their common values influence the choices of journalism stakeholders. Editors, journalists and producers face decisions of fairness every day, so why not have students contemplate these decisions at the school level. As my students found out, the concept of fairness in media is infused with values such as responsibility, empathy, honesty and accuracy. I shared my experience professionally and personally with these values for better or worse.

Ample moments exist to analyze such character values as represented across media. Ample moments present themselves for reflection upon the appropriate or inappropriate use of social media and how the presence or absence of character values shape choices. And ample moments occur to consider why these values are important to the human rights of a community locally and then globally. It can begin in the classroom as I learned from my training at The Dalai Lama Center.

By framing character values as an important focal point, a classroom community is obliged to consider how the actions or inaction of a literary character may sway a community, how the reaction or apathy toward a historical event alters the world, or how scientific decision or indecision may change life outcomes of a community. The SPARK Youth event and the Transformative Teachers program reminds a community of learners about how the discussion begins at the micro level in our communities-family, school or neighborhood- and may move locally, nationally and globally.

*who volunteered at the SPARK Youth event.*



*Comedian George Lopez entertained the students at the SPARK Youth event and discussed how one person's values like good humor can make an impact on their community.*



*Lowell High School students prepare to help SPARK participants make their flags representing their character values at the event.*

*Above Photos by Robert De Lossa*