

Students and teachers challenged to think deeply about 'good work'

Students and teachers at schools across the United States are being challenged to think about good work, what it constitutes, the challenges to achieving it, and the resulting implications.

Susan Verducci, a university professor, and Cheryl Christo, a high school teacher, are two educators who have introduced the subject of good work – defined as “work that is excellent in quality, socially responsible, and meaningful” — to their students. They are using the GoodWork® Toolkit developed by the GoodWork Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Both Christo and Verducci say that the Toolkit is pushing them and their students to think about various dimensions of their work, such as the ethical dimension, that they may have not considered before.

“I’ve begun to recognize that my students’ visions of themselves as teachers don’t include any ethical dimensions (positive or negative),” says Verducci, who teaches the theory in her Integration of Liberal Studies class. Most of her students plan to become elementary school teachers. “Other than seeing themselves as caring, and wanting to nurture and help students reach their potential, they haven’t thought about the ethical implications of themselves as authority figures, as graders, as arbiters of ‘normal’ behaviour.”

Verducci, a professor at San Jose University in San Jose California, says that the good work theory allows her to push the students into thinking about these issues. Some of the questions they discuss include: What is good work and why is it important? What kind of person-worker am I and what do I want to become? What are factors that challenge people in carrying out their best work? What can one do to prepare

for these challenges?

Christo, Choral Director at Arlington High School in Arlington, Massachusetts, says the program has generated intense discussions among her students. "I think it broadens how they think," she says. "It makes them think about what they do and why they do it."

Christo, a finalist for the Teacher of the Year Award in Massachusetts several years, was asked if she would pilot the GoodWork Toolkit in her classes.

She jumped at the chance, noting that her mission is always "to help the kids be the best they can be," a goal that the kit helps facilitate, she says.

Christo was so taken by the good work concept that she pushed for it to be introduced to the faculty in her fine arts department. Finally, after two years, it was offered last November to the Fine Arts staff at Arlington High School. Christo says there was a very positive reaction among the teachers to the theory.

For herself, Christo, says the program allows her the framework to really think about her work, why she does it and how she does it. She notes that she has a very strong moral ethic, describing herself as "Miss Black and White," as well as high work standards. "I think it enables me to articulate better what I do," she says.

Verducci notes that her understanding of good work "has pointed out how endemic ethical issues are in my line work. I now see the larger meaning of some of the choices that I make in my every day work-life. I also see the way the profession is structured that challenges any professional teacher to do good work."

Verducci says she has begun to frame her thinking with good work. "It seems now that when talking about issues of teaching with my students, even if we are not discussing good work, I translate the issue into the good work framework."

The GoodWork Project is a large scale effort by leaders from three American universities to identify individuals and institutions that exemplify good work and to determine how best to increase the incidence of good work in our society.