



Working the Compass: Theoretical Foundations

The purpose of this document is to acknowledge and describe the theoretical underpinnings that are foundational to scholar and adult development at Valor.

Comprehensive Human Development: We Teach Who We Are

"We teach who we are" (p. 5).

Parker Palmer, The Courage to Teach, 1998

Circle is a community-wide model aimed at developing capacities in adults as well as in scholars. Adults who are committed to their own development and to living out the Valor commitments in their relationships with each other are positioned to effectively guide scholars through the same processes. Adults are encouraged to "walk their talk" in terms of commitment to their their own individual and relational growth, as we believe this growth is the primary driver of scholar development. In fact, the primary way we train adults to lead Circles with scholars is by having them participate in their own faculty Circles.

Comprehensive Scholar Development: A Balanced Education

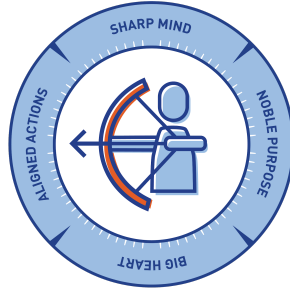
"Success goes beyond fulfilling individual goals and extends to having the agency and competencies to influence the world" (p. 13).

Nagaoka et al., Foundations for Young Adult Success, 2015

A strong K-12 education encompasses far more than mastery of knowledge in the core, academic content areas. Focusing only on these core content areas would likely lead to scholars lacking many of the skills needed for social-emotional development and overall well-being. Valor's comprehensive approach to scholar development includes fostering skills and mindsets necessary for present and future endeavors inside and, just as importantly, outside the classroom. At Valor, this comprehensive approach to skill and mindset development is known as a Balanced Education; an education focused on supporting scholars to find their True North¹,

¹ While True North connotes a northern direction, True North in this context refers to the center point on the Valor Compass (not pictured in this Compass diagram). The term True North was adopted from its use in navigation where it is recognized that finding true north is essential for accurate navigation. Just as true north is essential for such navigation, True North, or sense of center in this context, is necessary for accurate wayfinding in life.

balance their Sharp Minds and Big Hearts (vertical axis below), and draw on their Noble Purpose as they take Aligned Actions (horizontal axis below) in the world. At Valor, Circle is the primary communal and collaborative context for the honing of these disciplines.



Researchers and practitioners have begun to prioritize and study these skills and mindsets that have not traditionally been incorporated into curricula or state academic standards. While they have come to be known by many names (e.g., character development habits, non-academic skills, 21st Century skills, etc.), they are collectively understood to support the development of social-emotional growth. Such growth is “in service of human development and academic success” (Stafford-Brizard, 2016, p. 4). The Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) states such growth, known as social-emotional learning (SEL), is “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (What is SEL?, 2016). At Valor, we call such social-emotional learning the development of core Compass Habits and the process by which this happens “working the Compass”. The practice of Circle shows a deep commitment to such development.

Comprehensive scholar development is more than a “feel good” approach. In fact, the research base on the plethora of benefits for scholars is difficult to ignore. Positive correlates include improved current and future academic performance, “reduced racial/ethnic and gender disparities in school performance and educational attainment,” and inter- and intra- personal development (Stafford-Brizard, 2016; Farrington et al., 2012, p. 5). The benefits are numerous and are a function of the specific habits taught and honed. However, it is clear that a focus on academic knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient. We believe that focusing on core Compass Habits is at the center of positive human development - a true Balanced Education. Circle is an organizational practice to catalyze this growth and to support well-being.

The Valor Compass: A Model for Human Development

“Our Compass model is a human development model that is grounded in the foundational elements of what it means to be human. ‘Working the Compass’ means growing in body, mind,

heart, and spirit in pursuit of excellence in every dimension.”

Daren Dickson, Valor Collegiate Academies, 2016

Comprehensive scholar and adult development is rooted in the Valor Compass model (see below).

The associated disciplines and core Compass Habits reside on the Valor Compass, which is a visual representation and metaphor for the approach Valor takes to development, growth, and learning. The Compass is a symbol rich with embedded dimensions, disciplines, and habits meant to guide development towards an *Inner Compass*; a personalized wayfinding tool. The metaphor of the Compass was chosen because at Valor we believe it is essential for every member of the community to hone and utilize a personal wayfinding tool to be used in service of creating and living out inspired and purposeful lives. “Working the Compass” includes aspiring to develop individually, in relationships, and within a larger community within the broad strokes of these dimensions, and within the finer details of the disciplines and habits. Through the practice of Circle, scholars and adults are supported to explore and reflect on the Compass Disciplines and core Habits within a safe and supportive community.

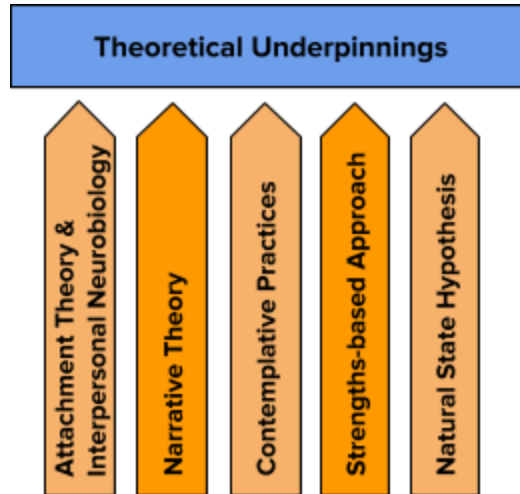


Theory of Growth: Working the Compass

At Valor we believe that Compass Disciplines and Habits develop through the following Theory of Growth:

If scholars and adults are embedded in safe, strong relationships within communities of care and concern and are empowered to "work the Compass" within all core human dimensions - mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual - then they will create the foundation for and live out inspired and purposeful lives.

This Theory of Growth is informed by the theories outlined in the upcoming sections. The image below depicts the theoretical underpinnings for the Valor approach to the development of core Compass Habits.



Attachment Theory & Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB): The Importance of Relationships

"Relationships are the fuel for human development" (p. 4).

Brooke Stafford-Brizard, Building Blocks for Learning, 2016

"Students who feel deeply connected don't need danger to feel fully alive. They don't need guns to feel powerful. They don't want to hurt others or themselves. Out of connection grow both compassion and passion - for people, for students' goals and dreams, for life itself" (p. 35).

Rachael Kessler, The Soul of Education, 2000

From the foundational work of early attachment theorists it is clear that consistent care is necessary for babies to thrive, to feel safe enough to explore, and to take appropriate risks (Bowlby, 1988). While developmental needs change over time, adolescents still need these "safe bases" to be seen, feel safe, be soothed, and feel secure - the four "Ss" of attachment (Siegel, 2013). Further, healthy and safe relationships are necessary for adults to experience these same domains of attachment. Thus, throughout the lifespan humans are continuously in need of sound, relational interaction and support.

From the scholar development perspective, the importance of safe and strong relationships in school settings has become a critical topic of conversation and research. Experts have expanded on what the relationships between youth and adults in school settings should look like and have coined such relationships "developmental relationships". These relationships are "not only for communicating and providing care and support to youth as they grow, but also as a critical site for expressing challenge and expanding opportunities" (Nagaoka et al., 2015, p. 53). Valor's approach to core Compass Habit development is rooted in this notion that a necessary condition for growth and learning is healthy, safe relationships. Circle provides a forum in which such relational dynamics evolve, are reinforced, and are maintained between and among scholars and

adults.

The field of Interpersonal Neurobiology also sheds light on the power of relationships to catalyze healing and growth. This interdisciplinary field points to the fact that learning and development occur most effectively when rooted in healthy relationships. In fact, Interpersonal Neurobiology posits that relationships “...inspire us to rewire our brains toward integration” (Siegel, 2017, p. 199). This integration refers to a “coming together” of ourselves, creating deeper connection with others, linking knowledge and skills, etc. through stable, healthy relationships to others. Through the practice of Circle, scholars and adults are provided with opportunities to be in relationship with peers and colleagues respectively in ways that acknowledge and grow these connections.

Narrative Theory: Multi-Storied Identity Development

“The stories we have about our lives are created through linking certain events together in a particular sequence across a time period, and finding a way of explaining or making sense of them. This meaning forms the plot of the story. We give meanings to our experiences constantly as we live our lives. A narrative is like a thread that weaves the events together, forming a story.”

What is Narrative Therapy?, The Dulwich Center, 2017

The question of “Who am I?” is one that is pondered over and over again throughout life. The answer to this begins to emerge from the day a person is born. However, there are certain “critical periods” in life when answering this question becomes a larger part of existence. Adolescence is one such critical time in life when individuals begin to intentionally tinker with answering this important wonderment. Given that identity development is a lifelong process, adults also continue to work with and deepen their understanding of their identity over time. Circle, and associated phase work, is the context where deep identity exploration can happen safely within a community of care for scholars and adults alike.

There are many factors that influence identity development and have an impact on answering the question “Who am I?”. These factors include, but are not limited to, culture, religion, history, school experience, friends, family, and all of the experiences in life that influence one’s sense of self. Individuals weave these factors and experiences together, often times largely unconsciously, into a set of *self-stories* that come to define their identity.

At Valor, a key to healthy identity development is realizing the power of *self-authorship* in the development of these self-stories. This approach to identity development is rooted in the practices of Narrative Theory, which is based on the foundation that we make meaning of our lives and define ourselves - and are defined by others - via stories (White, 2007). At Valor the aim is to help everyone in our community learn to examine their own self-stories and the stories they hold about others. Scholars and adults are supported to make sure the stories upon which they build their identity are stories they have intentionally chosen through self-reflection and deep listening. Through practices of reflection and self-authorship, members of our community move

from thin, single stories about theirs and others' lives, to deeper and broader multi-storied understandings of themselves and others. Such multi-storied identities are developed through exploration of less prominent, but equally powerful, storylines about themselves that align with their deepest values; there is space to explore the parts of themselves that others see, but which may go overlooked. Thus, according to Michael White, the founder of Narrative Therapy, "The adventures to be had on these journeys are not about confirmation of what is already known, but about expeditions into what is possible for people to know about their lives" (White, 2007).

Developing and living from strong, conscious, multi-storied identities is lifelong work. Providing opportunities for self-authorship is a core component of Valor's approach to identity development for scholars and adults. The practice of Circle, and associated Phase Work, provides the context for such re-storying to take place.

Contemplative Practices: Finding True North

"Coming to the present moment creates a sense of newness that refreshes and connects" (p. 160).

Kirke Olson, The Invisible Classroom, 2014

Generally speaking, scholars and adults alike face great challenges successfully navigating their lives in our complex, modern, hyperspeed culture. As such, Valor places emphasis on True North practices, or contemplative practices, to support effective and grounded navigation. Valor's True North practices draw on modern scientific interest in the power of attentional control and mindful awareness as well as on the spiritual teachings of the contemplative traditions of all great human faith traditions from the past 3,000 years. These practices, which open every Circle, are meant to support all members of the community to find their center point - a place of presence and balance. Valor takes care to introduce all practices in a secular manner but encourages scholars and their families, as well as all adults in the school community, to investigate and explore practices from their own faith traditions, or simply practices of interest, as a way to deepen their understanding of their own True North.

From the scholar perspective, the period of adolescence is often tumultuous and "the work of adolescence can set the stage for the development of core character traits that will enable adolescents to go on and lead great lives of adventure and purpose" (Siegel, 2013, p. 2). These critical years must be approached intentionally and with care. Developmentally, adolescents are at prime ages to work towards greater regulation of thoughts, emotions, and actions (Siegel, 2013). At Valor True North practices provide sound opportunities to access and grow regulated ways of being, foundations necessary for growth in this period of life and beyond.

Researchers have studied the benefits of contemplative practices in school settings and have found significant evidence to suggest many positive outcomes for scholars. These exercises have been found to improve emotional and behavioral self-regulation, frustration tolerance, self-control, emotional intelligence, durations of sustained attention and concentration, cognitive

functioning, self-esteem, social skills, and overall well-being among adolescents (Wisner, Jones, & Gwin, 2010; Goleman, 2011; Beauchemin, Hutchins, & Patterson, 2008). Studies have also found that such practices, when engaged in regularly, decrease anxiety, impulsivity, and distractibility (Black, Milan, & Sussman, 2009). Further, such practices support individuals to “become mindful of their felt experience[s]”, arrive in the present moment, and “become aware of consistent features of their internal environment that are often otherwise unnoticed” (Kram, 2011, p. 23). Specifically, these practices help youth develop the ability to observe their thoughts, feelings, and urges towards action. They provide pauses to reflect before choosing courses of action. Rather than simply reacting impulsively to experiences, scholars learn to slow down long enough to ensure that their actions are aligned with their intentions and values.

Studies have also shown benefits of contemplative practices for adults in school communities. Teachers who participated in such practices were found to ruminate less about their job during off-hours, have greater overall work and non-work related satisfaction, and improved sleep (Crain, Schonert-Reichl, & Roeser, 2017). Additional research suggests that mindfulness practices, “help equip them [teachers] with the tools needed to respond to unique stressors of the teaching profession, and potentially reduce burnout and attrition” (Dorman, 2015, p. 103).

There is therefore much evidence to support the efficacy of including True North practices in the Circle structure for both scholars and adults.

Strengths-Based Approach: Recognizing, Illuminating, and Applying Strengths

"When we inject people with positivity, their outlook expands. They see the big picture. When we inject them with neutrality or negativity, their peripheral vision shrinks. There is no big picture, no dots to connect" (p. 95).

Barbara Fredrickson, Positivity, 2009

At Valor we embrace tenets of positive psychology and the greater strengths-based approach to development. Positive psychology points us to the simple but important recognition that our brains are hardwired to assess for danger and to focus on problems. If we aren't vigilant, we will consistently focus on the negative. We need only watch the evening news to see this human tendency on full display. New research, however, has demonstrated that intentionally focusing on and creating positivity and solutions is not only better for our well-being, but it actually allows for a more productive and effective way to solve problems and build healthy relationships (Fredrickson, 2009).

Positive psychology is a part of a larger movement, the strength-based approach, that focuses on harnessing the power of this research. Strength-based approaches focus on identifying, applying, and further developing signature strengths; these are featured strengths that can be used to build strong and durable identities within individuals. Such approaches have been found to have a variety of important benefits for youth and adults. For youth, strength-based approaches have been found to result in improved engagement in school, increased levels of curiosity, heightened

love of learning, and improved life satisfaction (Gillham et al., 2013; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). For adults, strength-based approaches to development have been found to be linked with increased well-being, job satisfaction, and employee engagement (Harzer & Ruch, 2012; Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Crabb, 2011). At Valor, Circle and accompanying Phase Work provide opportunities for scholars and adults to recognize, illuminate, and apply their signature strengths.

The Natural State Hypothesis

*"I inhale great draughts of space,
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.
I am larger, better than I thought,
I did not know I held so much goodness."*

Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass: Song of the Open Road, 1856

All of us move between various states of being throughout a given day - we have moments in which we feel balanced, present, and happy and moments in which we feel swept away by frustration, worry, or disappointment. Often we don't reflect on the important and powerful role that these "states" have on our moment-to-moment functioning. One day we might feel warm and curious in a particular context and act kindly, and the next day we might feel closed and irritable in the same context and act in an unkind manner. At Valor we believe that an important part of healthy human development is learning to access our most balanced, present, and open state of being - our "best self" - on a regular basis and to stay connected to this state of being on a more and more consistent basis.

Our natural state hypothesis is that this natural state is always available to us. In fact, in some important ways this natural state and way of connecting with the world may be more accessible when we are younger. Even young children have the capacity to be in genuinely open-hearted and open-minded states that help them interact with others and the world in kind, curious, and genuine ways. As individuals mature and become socialized, however, they can lose touch with the capacity to access these states due to multiple factors, such as increased self-consciousness and insecurity and an overall Western cultural bias toward the "rational mind". These factors can obscure or overshadow access to this natural state. This shadowing can become even more pronounced due to trauma, disconnection, violence, or other adverse life experiences.

At Valor we believe this insight and recognition of an ever-accessible present and balanced natural state is important because it guides our approach to development. Rather than thinking of Compass development in terms of strict skill acquisition, we recognize that an important element of our work is to support navigation back to this natural state of being that resides in all humans from birth.

References

- Beauchemin, J., Hutchins, T. L., & Patterson, L. (2008). Mindfulness meditation may lessen anxiety, promote social skills, and improve academic performance among adolescents with learning disabilities. *Complementary Health Practice Review*, 13, 34-45. doi: 10.1177/1533210107311624
- Black, D. S., Milan, J., & Sussman, S. (2009). Sitting-meditation interventions among youth: A review of treatment efficacy. *Pediatrics*, 124(3), 532-541.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. London, England: Routledge.
- Crabb, S. (2011). The use of coaching principles to foster employee engagement. *The Coaching Psychologist*, 7, 27-34.
- Crain, T. L., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., & Roeser, R. W. (2017). Cultivating teacher mindfulness: Effects of a randomized controlled trial on work, home and sleep outcomes. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 22(2), 138 - 152. doi: 10.1037/ocp0000043
- Davidson, R. J., Dunne, J., Eccles, J. S., Engle, A., Greenberg, M., Jennings, P., ... Vago, D. (2014). Contemplative practices and mental training: Prospects for American education. *Child Development Perspectives*, 0(0), 1-8. doi: 10.1111/j.1750-8606.2012.00240.x
- Dorman, E. (2015). Building teachers' social-emotional competence through mindful practices. *Curriculum and teaching dialogue* (pp. 103-109). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Farrington, C. A., Roderick, M., Allensworth, E., Nagaoka, J., Keyes, T. S., Johnson, D. W., & Beechum, N. O. (2012). *Teaching adolescents to become learners. The role of noncognitive factors in shaping school performance: A critical literature review*. Retrieved from <http://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Noncognitive%20Report.pdf>
- Fredrickson, B. (2009). *Positivity*. New York, NY: Random House Press.
- Gillham, J., Abenavoli, R., Brunwasser, S., Linkins, M., Reivich, K., & Seligman, M. (2013). Resilience education. In S. David, I. Boniwell, & A. Conley Ayers (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of*

- happiness* (pp. 609 - 630). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goleman, D. (2011). *The brain and emotional intelligence*. Northampton, MA: More Than Sound.
- Harzer, C., & Ruch, W. (2012). When the job is calling: The role of applying one's signature strengths at work. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 7*, 362-371.
doi:10.1080/17439760.2012.702784
- Jinpa, T. (2015). *A fearless heart: How the courage to be compassionate can transform our lives*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House LLC.
- Kessler, R. (2000). *The soul of education: Helping students find connection, compassion, and character at school*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Kram, G. (2011). *Applied mindfulness: Inner life skills for youth*. Berkeley, CA: Applied Mindfulness, Inc.
- Littman-Ovadia, H., & Steger, M. (2010). Character strengths and well-being among volunteers and employees: Toward an integrative model. *Journal of Positive Psychology, 5*, 419-430.
doi: 10.1080/17439760.2010.516765
- McAlpine, M. (2016). *I belong deeply to myself*. Retrieved from <http://us13.campaign-archive1.com/?u=ef71981b858fdb81288a89fe2&id=e1b1872f32&e=ac24ea72e0>
- Nagaoka, J., Farrington, C. A., Ehrlich, S. B., Heath, R. D., Johnson, D. W., Dickson, S., ... Hayes, K. (2015). *Foundations for young adult success: A developmental framework*. Retrieved from <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Foundations%20for%20Young%20Adult-Jun2015-Consortium.pdf>
- Nine Affects, Present at Birth, Combine with Life Experience to Form Emotion and Personality. (2016, November 10). Retrieved from <http://www.tomkins.org/what-tomkins-said/introduction/nine-affects-present-at-birth-combine-to-form-emotion-mood-and-personality/>
- Olson, K. (2014). *The invisible classroom: Relationships, neuroscience, & mindfulness in school*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company Inc.
- Palmer, P. J. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Panksepp, J. & Biven, L. (2012). *The archaeology of mind: Neuroevolutionary origins of human emotion*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.

Seligman, M. E. P., Ernst, R. M., Gillham, J., Reivich, K., & Linkins, M. (2009). Positive education: positive psychology and classroom interventions. *Oxford Review of Education*, 35, 293-311. doi: 10.1080/03054980902934563

Siegel, D. (2013). *Brainstorm*. New York: Penguin Group.

Siegel, D. (2017). *Mind: A journey to the heart of being human*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company Inc.

Stafford-Brizard, B. (2016). *Building blocks for learning: A framework for comprehensive scholar development*. Retrieved from <http://turnaroundusa.org>

What is Narrative Therapy?. (2017, January 5). Retrieved from <http://dulwichcentre.com.au/what-is-narrative-therapy/>

What is SEL?. (2016, October 10). Retrieved from <http://www.casel.org/what-is-sel/>.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc.

Whitman, W. "Song of the Open Road." *Leaves of Grass: 1856 Edition*, Dover Publications, Inc., 2007.

Wisner, B. L., Jones, B., & Gwin, D. (2010). School based meditation practices for adolescents: A resource for strengthening self-regulation, emotional coping, and self-esteem. *Children and Schools*, 32(3), 150 - 159.