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Reorientation of Character Education Towards a Holistic-Humanistic Approach in the Context of Higher Education

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ABSTRAK

Pendidikan karakter di perguruan tinggi masih banyak dijalankan melalui pendekatan normatif-instruksional yang menekankan kepatuhan pada aturan dan transmisi daftar nilai, padahal mahasiswa berada pada fase dewasa awal yang menuntut ruang refleksi, dialog, dan otonomi moral. Penelitian non-empiris ini bertujuan merumuskan kerangka konseptual pendidikan karakter berbasis penalaran karakter (*character reasoning*) sebagai reorientasi menuju pendekatan holistik-humanistik. Kajian menggunakan desain tinjauan teoretis integratif terhadap 52 sumber yang terdiri atas 29 artikel jurnal internasional bereputasi, 7 artikel jurnal nasional terakreditasi, dan 16 buku atau bab buku. Analisis dilakukan melalui pemetaan deskriptif, analisis isi kualitatif terarah, dan sintesis teori. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa teori perkembangan moral, pendidikan karakter berbasis pengalaman, dan pedagogi humanistik-relasional saling melengkapi dalam menjembatani kesenjangan antara pengetahuan moral dan tindakan moral, tetapi selama ini dikaji secara terpisah. Kajian ini menghasilkan Model *Character Reasoning* yang memadukan ketiga fondasi tersebut melalui siklus perjumpaan, penimbangan, dialog, dan tindakan reflektif, disertai empat proposisi yang dapat diuji secara empiris. Model ini menawarkan dasar konseptual bagi desain mata kuliah wajib kurikulum, khususnya Pendidikan Pancasila dan Kewarganegaraan, serta budaya kampus yang menempatkan mahasiswa sebagai subjek moral.

Keywords:

Character Education
Moral Reasoning
Humanistic Pedagogy
Experiential Learning

ABSTRACT

Character education in higher education is still mostly delivered through a normative-instructional approach that stresses rule compliance and value transmission, although university students are emerging adults who need room for reflection, dialogue, and moral autonomy. This non-empirical study formulates a conceptual framework of character education grounded in character reasoning as a reorientation towards a holistic-humanistic approach. An integrative theoretical review was conducted on 52 sources consisting of 29 articles in reputable international journals, 7 articles in accredited national journals, and 16 books or book chapters. The analysis combined descriptive mapping, directed content analysis, and theory synthesis. The findings show that moral development theory, experiential character education, and humanistic-relational pedagogy complement one another in bridging the gap between moral knowledge and moral action, yet they have mostly been studied in isolation. The study proposes a Character Reasoning Model that integrates the three foundations through a cycle of encounter, deliberation, dialogue, and reflective enactment, with four testable propositions. The model informs the design of compulsory courses, particularly Pancasila and Civic Education, and a campus culture that treats students as moral agents.

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INTRODUCTION

Character education in Indonesian higher education carries a formal mandate. Law Number 12 of 2012 on Higher Education requires every undergraduate curriculum to include religion, Pancasila, civic education, and the Indonesian language as compulsory courses, and the law frames these courses as the backbone of students' moral and civic formation (Pemerintah Republik Indonesia, 2012). The mandate is clear but its pedagogical translation is not. National studies repeatedly describe character education on campus as the delivery of value lists through lectures, habituation programmed, and lecturer role modelling (Dewi et al., 2020; Nurpratiwi, 2021). A survey of teacher education students found that they had mastered the content of civic education courses while the values in question were only weakly enacted in their daily lives (Hikmah, 2021). Integrated models developed to prevent violations of character values likewise rest on the assumption that consistent exposure and supervision will produce good conduct (Nur et al., 2021). These studies point to a persistent distance between what students know about values and what they actually do.

The distance is partly a developmental matter. Most undergraduates are emerging adults who are exploring identity, worldview, and commitments with a degree of freedom that no earlier life stage allows (Arnett, 2000). Their growth depends on learning to trust an internal voice, to build an internal foundation, and to secure internal commitments, a process Baxter Magolda (2001, 2008) calls self-authorship. Evidence gathered with the Defining Issues Test shows that moral judgement continues to develop during college and that specific educational experiences shape the size of that development (King & Mayhew, 2002; Mayhew et al., 2016). A pedagogy that asks students only to comply with rules works against this developmental task because it substitutes external authority for the reasoning that students are trying to construct.

The renewed international interest in character education at university level makes the question timely. For much of the twentieth century explicit moral education retreated from the curricula of research universities, and character was left to the hidden curriculum of campus life (Lamb et al., 2022). Over the last two decades scholars have argued that universities cannot avoid shaping character and ought to do so deliberately and transparently, in ways compatible with academic freedom and pluralism (Brant et al., 2022; Colby et al., 2003). In this debate the term holistic refers to the cultivation of the whole person, which includes cognition, emotion, motivation, and action, while the term humanistic refers to treating students as agents whose dignity, experience, and voice are integral to their moral growth (Noddings, 2013; Rogers, 1983). A holistic-humanistic approach is not an alternative to moral content. It is a claim about how moral content becomes the student's own.

Conceptual precision is also needed because the terms character, morality, and virtue are often used interchangeably in Indonesian policy documents and classroom practice. In the neo-Aristotelian tradition character refers to a set of stable dispositions that integrate perception, emotion, reasoning, and action, and virtue is the excellent form of such a disposition (Kristjánsson, 2015). The moral reasoning tradition focuses more narrowly on the structure of judgement about what one ought to do (Kohlberg, 1981; Rest et al., 1999). Lickona (1991) offered an educational synthesis in which good character consists of moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action. This study uses the term character reasoning to name the reflective process through which these elements are brought together by the student. The term does not replace character. It identifies the process through which character can be educated at university level, where students are expected to give reasons for their commitments rather than merely display them.

Three bodies of scholarship have addressed this problem from different angles. The first is the moral reasoning tradition. Kohlberg (1981, 1984) described moral development as a movement from obedience and self-interest towards reasoning based on justice, and the neo-Kohlbergian approach reformulated stages as schemas of personal interest, norm maintenance, and postconventional thinking that can be traced in adult populations (Rest et al., 1999). Later work exposed the limits of reasoning alone. Narvaez (2010) argued that mature moral functioning integrates intuition and deliberation, while Darnell et al. (2019) and Kristjánsson et al. (2021) proposed phronesis or practical wisdom as the integrative capacity that links moral perception, emotion, identity, and judgement in concrete situations. This tradition explains how moral judgement matures yet offers little guidance on how a university course should be designed to cultivate it.

The second body of scholarship concerns character education in universities through experience. Programmes at Oxford and Wake Forest have shown that intentionally designed courses using moral exemplars, reflection, friendship, and practice can produce small but consistent gains in targeted virtues and in students' sense of purpose (Brant et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2022; Maranges et al., 2024; Mendonça et al., 2024). A longitudinal case study found that students developed moral expertise mainly through mentors, peer communities, and practice rather than through formal instruction (Cox et al., 2022), and service-learning research reports positive effects on social, personal, and cognitive outcomes (Yorio & Ye, 2012). These studies demonstrate that experience matters, but they are largely situated in Anglo-American institutions with a neo-Aristotelian vocabulary and give limited attention to the relational and emotional conditions that make experience educative.

The third body of scholarship is humanistic and relational. Rogers (1983) located significant learning in relationships marked by genuineness, acceptance, and empathy, and Noddings (2012, 2013) placed the caring relation at the centre of moral education. A meta-analysis of 119 studies confirmed that learner-centred teacher-student relationships are associated with positive cognitive and affective outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007). Humanizing pedagogy extends this line by drawing on Freire's critique of banking education (Freire, 2005; Salazar, 2013), although a scoping review found that research on humanizing pedagogy in higher education is still emerging and mostly conceptual (Mapaling & Hoelson, 2022). Social and emotional learning offers robust evidence of lasting benefits in schools (Taylor et al., 2017) and has been proposed as a partner of character development (Elias, 2009), but its application to university settings still faces problems of scalability, long-term evaluation, and cultural responsiveness (Mukhemar et al., 2025). This tradition explains the conditions of growth while leaving the cognitive structure of moral judgement largely implicit.

Indonesian scholarship has added contextual models. Local wisdom has been used as a source of character education in higher education through habituation, role modelling, value internalization, and the creation of value-laden situations (Hidayati et al., 2020). Civic education researchers have developed a modified project citizen model supported by digital media (Trisiana et al., 2019), mapped the opportunities and threats that digital culture poses to character education (Triyanto, 2020), and used blended learning to develop students' civic responsibility (Cahyono et al., 2024). These contributions enrich the repertoire of delivery models. Few of them, however, theorize how reasoning, lived experience, and pedagogical relationships work together as one mechanism of character formation.

Taken together, the state of the art reveals three gaps. The moral reasoning, experiential, and humanistic traditions have developed in parallel and are rarely integrated into a single educational framework. Integrative efforts that do exist are designed for schools or for Western liberal arts colleges and seldom address emerging adults studying within the compulsory civic education courses of a Pancasila-based higher education system. Existing frameworks also tend to remain descriptive and do not formulate propositions that empirical studies could test. The earlier version of this study juxtaposed the three traditions without specifying how they interact. The present study moves further by proposing a Character Reasoning Model in which moral reasoning functions as the hinge that converts campus experience into personal moral meaning under the condition of humanizing relationships. The novelty lies in three features, namely the specification of a four-phase reflective cycle that links the three foundations, the translation of the model into the context of Indonesian compulsory courses and campus culture, and the formulation of four testable propositions.

Table 1 condenses this state of the art. It lists representative studies from each cluster, their context and contribution, and the specific gap that the present study takes up. The table shows that the gap is not a lack of studies on character education but a lack of integration between explanations of moral judgement, evidence on experiential programmes, and theories of educative relationships, particularly for Indonesian universities.

Table 1.
State of the Art and Position of the Present Study

Representative studies	Context and focus	Main contribution	Gap taken up in this study
Rest et al. (1999); King and Mayhew (2002)	Adults and college students; neo-Kohlbergian moral judgement	Schema account of adult moral reasoning; evidence of growth during college	No design for cultivating reasoning in courses
Darnell et al. (2019); Kristjánsson et al. (2021)	Theory; phronesis and the knowledge-action gap	Integrative account linking perception, emotion, identity, and judgement	Psychological model not translated into a teaching cycle
Brooks et al. (2019); Brant et al. (2020)	Oxford postgraduates; leadership and virtue programme	Small but consistent gains in focal virtues	Elite Western setting; relational conditions implicit
Lamb et al. (2022); Mendonça et al. (2024); Maranges et al. (2024)	United States undergraduates; course-based character interventions	Growth in targeted virtues, purpose, and reliance on exemplars	Strategies listed rather than integrated into a mechanism
Cox et al. (2022)	Faith-based university; moral expertise	Mentors, communities, and practice drive moral growth	Not connected to theories of moral reasoning
Cornelius-White (2007); Taylor et al. (2017)	Meta-analyses; teacher-student relations and social and emotional learning	Relational quality and emotional skills predict lasting outcomes	School-based evidence; moral reasoning outcomes unspecified
Mapaling and Hoelson (2022)	Scoping review; humanizing pedagogy in higher education	Field emerging and mostly conceptual	No model of character formation
Hidayati et al. (2020); Hikmah (2021); Nurpratiwi (2021)	Indonesian universities; local wisdom, civic, and moral education	Strategies of habituation and modelling; gap between knowing and doing	Transmission-oriented; reasoning left implicit
Trisiana et al. (2019); Cahyono et al. (2024)	Indonesian civic education; digital and blended learning models	Innovative delivery of civic and character learning	Mechanism of character formation not theorized
Present study	Indonesian higher education; integrative conceptual review	Character Reasoning Model with a four-phase cycle and four propositions	Integration of the three traditions for emerging adults

Source: Conceptual synthesis of the literature (2026)

This study aims to formulate a conceptual framework of character education in higher education that is grounded in character reasoning. It addresses three research questions. How do the moral reasoning, experiential, and humanistic traditions conceptualize character formation, and where do they converge or diverge? How can these traditions be integrated into a coherent Character Reasoning Model suited to higher education? What implications and testable propositions follow for curriculum, pedagogy, and research in Indonesian higher education?

METHOD

This is a non-empirical conceptual study that employs an integrative theoretical review. An integrative review was chosen because it allows literature from different traditions and methodological backgrounds to be critically combined in order to generate new frameworks and perspectives (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016). The study follows the theory synthesis and model-building approaches described by Jaakkola (2020), in which a conceptual article summarizes and integrates existing theories into a new configuration and then specifies relationships among constructs. The data consist of published texts. No human participants were involved and no primary data were collected.

Sources were identified through Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar for international literature and through the Garuda portal for Indonesian journals. Search strings combined the terms character education, moral education, moral reasoning, moral development, phronesis, experiential learning, service learning, humanistic education, humanizing pedagogy, caring, social and emotional learning, higher education, university students, and their Indonesian equivalents such as pendidikan karakter, mahasiswa, and perguruan tinggi. Backward citation tracking was applied to locate seminal works. Classical theoretical

works were included regardless of publication year, while empirical and review articles were limited to the period 2000 to 2025 with priority given to publications from 2019 onwards.

Four inclusion criteria guided selection. A source had to address character or moral formation through at least one of the three traditions, refer to higher education or emerging adults or provide a foundational theory widely used in higher education research, be published in a peer-reviewed journal or as a scholarly book or chapter, and be available in full text. Opinion pieces without a theoretical argument, studies focused exclusively on early childhood, and duplicate reports of the same study were excluded. School-based studies were retained only when they provided the evidential basis of a construct used in the model, as in the case of social and emotional learning.

The final corpus consisted of 52 sources. Twenty-nine are articles in reputable international journals, seven are articles in accredited national journals indexed in SINTA, and sixteen are books or book chapters. By period of publication, seven sources appeared before 2000, twenty-three between 2000 and 2018, and twenty-two between 2019 and 2025. The older sources are mainly classical theoretical works, while the recent sources are mainly empirical studies and reviews. Methodological references and the statutory source cited in this article are not part of the analysed corpus. The composition of the corpus by theoretical strand and source type is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Composition of the Analysed Corpus by Theoretical Strand and Source Type

Theoretical strand	International journals	National journals	Books and chapters	Total
Moral reasoning and character development	9	0	6	15
Experiential and university-based character education	11	0	6	17
Humanistic-relational pedagogy and social-emotional learning	8	0	4	12
Indonesian higher education context	1	7	0	8
Total	**29**	**7**	**16**	**52**

Source: Authors' corpus mapping (2026)

Analysis proceeded in three stages. In the descriptive mapping stage, each source was coded for type, year, context, and theoretical strand. In the content analysis stage, a directed qualitative content analysis was applied using five analytic categories derived from the research questions, namely the conception of character, the mechanism of formation, the role of the educator, the role of context, and the type of evidence (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Krippendorff, 2019). In the synthesis stage the coded material was compared across strands to identify convergences, tensions, and complementary functions, which were then organized into a model and a set of propositions (Jaakkola, 2020). Rigour was pursued by documenting coding decisions in analytic memos, by returning to the original texts whenever an interpretation was contested among the authors, and by reporting the composition of the corpus transparently (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The corpus is purposive rather than exhaustive and is suited to theory building rather than to estimating the prevalence of practices.

Model construction followed an abductive logic. Constructs that appeared across at least two strands, such as reflection, justification, care, and autonomy, were treated as candidate building blocks. Constructs that appeared in only one strand were examined for the function they performed, for example the provision of cognitive structure, situational content, or psychological safety. The building blocks were then arranged into a sequence that could be enacted in a course and checked against the original texts to ensure that the integration did not distort the meaning of any tradition. Propositions were formulated only for relationships that were supported by convergent theoretical arguments or by empirical findings reported in the corpus. This procedure keeps the claims proportional to a conceptual design, since the model specifies expected relationships rather than demonstrated effects.

The authors teach and research in civic education programmed at Indonesian universities. This position provided familiarity with the institutional setting of compulsory courses and with the national literature, and it also carried the risk of reading international theories through local assumptions. The risk

was addressed by separating the descriptive coding of each source from the interpretive synthesis and by checking whether claims attributed to a tradition could be traced to its original texts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first finding concerns the dominant paradigm. The national studies in the corpus describe character education on campus mainly as the transmission of predefined values through course content, habituation, institutional rules, and lecturer example (Dewi et al., 2020; Hidayati et al., 2020; Nur et al., 2021; Nurpratiwi, 2021). These approaches are valuable because they make values visible and give institutions a shared vocabulary. Their weakness appears when outcomes are examined. Students may master the content of civic education while enacting its values only weakly (Hikmah, 2021), and digital culture introduces moral situations that pre-specified value lists do not anticipate (Triyanto, 2020). The international literature recognizes the same pattern. Walker et al. (2015) called for a new era of character education with clearer theoretical foundations, and Lickona (1991) had already insisted that moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action must be cultivated together. In practice the normative paradigm tends to reduce this triad to knowing and complying.

The second finding is that moral reasoning is necessary but not sufficient. Kohlberg's framework shows that the quality of reasons, rather than the content of a rule, marks moral maturity (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984). The schema account of Rest et al. (1999) makes this insight usable for adults because it treats development as a shift in the relative use of personal interest, norm maintenance, and postconventional schemas. Studies with the Defining Issues Test indicate that higher education is one of the strongest contexts for such shifts (King & Mayhew, 2002; Mayhew et al., 2016). The same literature acknowledges a gap between judgement and action. Narvaez (2010) showed that reasoning operates alongside intuitive processes that are shaped by experience and community, and Narvaez and Lapsley (2009) located moral identity at the junction of cognition and motivation. The phronesis model proposes that practical wisdom performs the integrative work of perceiving what matters, weighing competing considerations, regulating emotions, and connecting a decision to one's conception of a good life (Darnell et al., 2019; Kristjánsson, 2015; Kristjánsson et al., 2021). Reasoning in this sense is not abstract calculation. It is the capacity to give and test reasons in concrete situations.

Read in relation to university students, these accounts suggest a characteristic developmental challenge. Many students enter higher education reasoning mainly from the maintenance of norms, which in the Indonesian setting often means the expectations of family, religious community, and institution. Higher education exposes them to plural perspectives, conflicting authorities, and situations that norms do not settle. The developmental task is not to abandon norms but to understand the reasons that justify them and to decide how they apply in new situations, which is the transition the neo-Kohlbergian literature describes as movement towards postconventional thinking (Rest et al., 1999) and the self-authorship literature describes as building an internal foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2008). A pedagogy that rewards only the correct statement of norms leaves students without support at precisely this point. The reasoning tradition contributes a diagnostic insight to the model, namely that the quality of students' reasons is the place where character education at university should intervene.

The third finding is that experience provides the material on which reasoning works. Dewey (1938) argued that experience educates only when it satisfies the principles of continuity and interaction, and Kolb (2015) described learning as the transformation of experience through reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation. Kolb and Kolb (2005) added that institutions shape the learning spaces in which this cycle can occur. University programmed that explicitly cultivate character rely heavily on structured experience. They combine exemplar study, reflection, dialogue with peers, and service or leadership practice (Brooks et al., 2019; Colby et al., 2003; Lamb et al., 2022). Evaluations report modest but consistent gains in targeted virtues (Brant et al., 2020), growth in purpose (Mendonça et al., 2024), and stronger reliance on relatable moral exemplars that supports purpose in life (Maranges et al., 2024). Students themselves attribute their moral growth to mentors, communities, and practice (Cox et al., 2022), and there is evidence that wisdom and psychosocial growth can be cultivated through university coursework (Ardelt, 2020). Purpose has been proposed as a unifying aim that connects academic learning with moral and civic formation (Colby, 2020; Damon, 2008). Indonesian models that use project citizen, local wisdom, and blended civic activities belong to the same experiential family (Cahyono et al., 2024; Hidayati et al., 2020; Trisiana et al., 2019).

Experience alone does not guarantee growth. Without guided reflection it may confirm existing prejudices, and without a safe relationship students may avoid the dissonance that experience produces.

The Indonesian studies in the corpus deserve separate attention because they show how the experiential strand has been adapted to local conditions. Local wisdom programmed use community narratives and figures as sources of exemplars and combine them with habituation in campus life (Hidayati et al., 2020). Civic education researchers have adapted project citizen into a digitally supported model in which students identify public problems, examine policy alternatives, and propose actions (Trisiana et al., 2019), and blended learning designs have been used to strengthen civic responsibility through asynchronous tasks and discussion (Cahyono et al., 2024). Integrative models developed in Islamic and private universities link course activities with institutional programmed in order to reduce violations of character values (Nur et al., 2021). These studies show considerable pedagogical creativity. Their common limitation, as far as the reported designs allow a judgement, is that student reasoning is treated as a by-product of participation rather than as an explicit object of teaching and assessment. The reflective and dialogic phases that would turn participation into examined commitment are present only implicitly.

The fourth finding is that relationships constitute the condition under which experience and reasoning become formative. Rogers (1983) and Palmer (1998) emphasized that learning which touches identity requires trust, authenticity, and the teacher's own integrity. Noddings (2012, 2013) framed teaching as a caring relation in which the educator attends to the student's expressed needs and models care through dialogue and confirmation. Meta-analytic evidence links empathy, warmth, and genuineness in teacher-student relationships with student engagement and achievement (Cornelius-White, 2007). Self-determination theory explains the mechanism by showing that values are more fully internalized when the social context supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Humanizing pedagogy adds a critical dimension because it treats students' lived realities as legitimate sources of knowledge and frames dialogue as a means of liberation rather than control (Freire, 2005; Mapaling & Hoelson, 2022; Salazar, 2013). Social and emotional learning provides evidence that emotional capacities can be taught and that they sustain positive outcomes over time (Elias, 2009; Taylor et al., 2017). Role modelling also depends on relationships. Sanderse (2013) argued that role modelling becomes educative only when educators make the reasons behind their conduct visible and invite students to reflect on them. Relationships need to be cultivated at the level of faculty as well, which is the focus of recent communities of practice for character education among university teachers (Allman et al., 2024).

Table 3 summarizes how each strand conceptualizes character, what mechanism it emphasizes, and what it misses when used alone. The comparison shows that each strand covers a weakness of the others. Reasoning gives structure to experience, experience gives content and urgency to reasoning, and relationships give the psychological safety needed to examine one's own convictions.

Table 3.
Synthesis Matrix of the Three Theoretical Strands

Strand	Conception of character	Emphasized mechanism	Limitation when used alone
Moral reasoning	Quality of reasons and practical wisdom in judging what is right	Cognitive restructuring through dilemmas and justification	Weak link between judgement and action; little guidance on course design
Experiential learning	Virtues and purpose formed through practice and exemplars	Engagement with real situations followed by reflection	Experience may confirm prejudice without guided reasoning and safe relationships
Humanistic-relational	Growth of the whole person in caring and authentic relationships	Trust, care, and autonomy support enabling internalization	Cognitive structure of moral judgement left implicit

Source: Conceptual synthesis of the literature (2026)

The synthesis also revealed three tensions that a credible model must resolve. The first tension lies between autonomy and normative anchoring. The reasoning and humanistic traditions value the student's own judgement, while character education programmed and Indonesian policy emphasize shared values that should not be left to individual preference (Lickona, 1991; Pemerintah Republik Indonesia, 2012). The

second tension lies between the individual and the community. Developmental theories describe change within the person, whereas experiential and humanizing approaches locate formation in communities of practice and in relations of care (Cox et al., 2022; Noddings, 2013; Salazar, 2013). The third tension lies between cognition and affect. Kohlbergian theory has been criticized for underplaying emotion and intuition, while some humanistic writing underplays the discipline of justification (Darnell et al., 2019; Narvaez, 2010). The model developed below addresses these tensions by treating shared values as the content of deliberation rather than as its replacement, by placing dialogue between personal reasoning and communal practice, and by treating emotion as information to be examined within reasoning rather than as an obstacle to it.

The fifth finding is the integrative model. The Character Reasoning Model defines character reasoning as the reflective capacity of a student to perceive the moral features of a situation, to weigh values and consequences, to justify a choice to oneself and others, and to act and learn from the results. The model rests on three foundations. Moral reasoning supplies the cognitive structure, social-contextual experience supplies the situations that call for judgement, and humanizing pedagogy supplies the relational climate in which judgement can be exercised honestly. The foundations are connected through a four-phase reflective cycle. In the encounter phase students meet a morally significant situation in class discussions, field projects, organizational life, or community service. In the deliberation phase they identify the values at stake, consider perspectives, and examine their own reasons. In the dialogue phase they test these reasons with peers and lecturers in a climate that permits disagreement. In the enactment and review phase they act, observe consequences, and revise their understanding, which opens a new encounter. Table 4 describes the components and their manifestations on campus, and Figure 1 visualizes the model.

Each phase is anchored in a different part of the corpus. The encounter phase draws on Dewey's (1938) principle that experience educates when it connects with prior experience and with the social environment, and on the evidence that exemplars and community practice provide powerful moral encounters for students (Cox et al., 2022; Maranges et al., 2024). The deliberation phase draws on the neo-Kohlbergian and phronesis literature, which locates moral growth in the capacity to recognize morally salient features and to weigh competing considerations (Darnell et al., 2019; Rest et al., 1999). The dialogue phase draws on Freire's (2005) understanding of dialogue as a relation between subjects and on Noddings's (2012) account of care as attentive listening and confirmation. The enactment and review phase draws on Kolb's (2015) experimentation stage and on the self-authorship literature, which describes how commitments become internal when students act on them and reflect on the consequences (Baxter Magolda, 2008). The cycle is iterative. Its repetition across courses and campus activities is expected to build the stable dispositions that the literature calls character, in line with the neo-Aristotelian view that virtue is formed through guided practice that is progressively informed by practical wisdom (Kristjánsson, 2015).

An illustration clarifies how the cycle may operate in a compulsory civic education course. A class may examine a local dispute over the use of public land in which community interests, legal provisions, and environmental concerns conflict. In the encounter phase students gather accounts from residents, officials, and news reports. In the deliberation phase they map the values at stake, such as social justice, legal certainty, and deliberation as expressed in the principles of Pancasila, and formulate a provisional position with explicit reasons. In the dialogue phase they defend and revise their positions in a seminar in which the lecturer protects dissent and asks for justification rather than conformity. In the enactment and review phase they prepare a policy recommendation or a community action in the manner of project citizen and later reflect on its reception. This scenario is a conceptual illustration rather than an empirical case. It shows that the model can be embedded in existing course structures without requiring a separate subject.

Table 4.
Components of the Character Reasoning Model and Their Manifestations on Campus

Component	Guiding question for students	Function in character formation	Manifestation on campus
Moral reasoning	Why is this choice right, and could I defend it?	Provides structure for weighing values and justifying decisions	Case analysis of constitutional and everyday dilemmas in civic education classes

Component	Guiding question for students	Function in character formation	Manifestation on campus
Social-contextual experience	What is at stake for real people here?	Supplies situations that call for judgement and test commitments	Project citizen, service learning, organizational and community activities
Humanizing pedagogy	Can I voice doubt and disagreement safely?	Creates the trust needed to examine and revise convictions	Dialogic seminars, mentoring, caring lecturer-student relations
Reflective cycle	What did I learn and what will I do next?	Links the three foundations through encounter, deliberation, dialogue, and enactment	Reflective journals and portfolios assessed for reasoning quality

Source: Construction based on conceptual synthesis

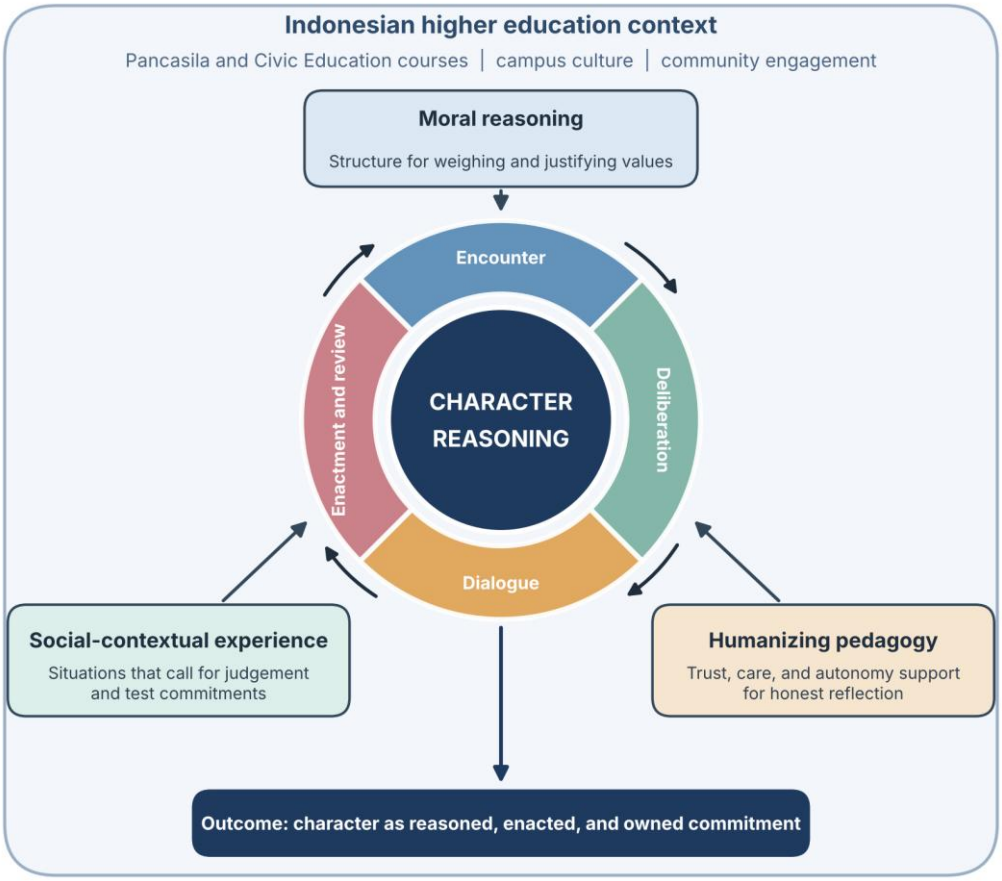


Figure 1. The Character Reasoning Model

Source: Construction based on conceptual synthesis

Four propositions follow from the model and can guide empirical studies. The first proposition states that learning designs combining authentic moral experiences with structured reflection will produce greater gains in postconventional reasoning than designs based on value instruction alone. The second proposition states that the effect of experiential activities on character outcomes is moderated by the perceived quality of lecturer-student relationships, with stronger effects in climates marked by autonomy support and care. The third proposition states that dialogue with peers and lecturers mediates the link between moral reasoning and moral action because it turns private judgement into accountable commitment. The fourth proposition states that institutional support for faculty development in dialogic and caring pedagogy increases the consistency with which the reflective cycle is implemented across courses. These propositions translate the conceptual argument into hypotheses that can be examined with instruments such as the Defining Issues Test, measures of purpose and moral identity, and qualitative analysis of reflective journals.

Table 5 summarizes the propositions together with the constructs involved and the kind of evidence that would support or weaken each of them. The table is intended as a bridge between the conceptual argument of this article and future empirical work, including work by civic education lecturers who wish to evaluate their own courses.

Table 5.
Propositions of the Character Reasoning Model and Suggested Empirical Tests

Proposition	Constructs involved	Suggested design	Evidence that would weaken it
P1. Authentic experience with structured reflection yields greater gains in postconventional reasoning than value instruction alone	Learning design; postconventional reasoning	Quasi-experiment comparing course sections with pre-test and post-test	No difference or smaller gains in reflective sections
P2. Relational quality moderates the effect of experiential activities on character outcomes	Autonomy support; perceived care; character outcomes	Survey with moderation analysis across classes	Effects unrelated to relational climate
P3. Dialogue mediates the link between moral reasoning and moral action	Reasoning; dialogue quality; self-reported and observed action	Mixed methods combining measures with analysis of classroom dialogue	Reasoning predicts action equally without dialogue
P4. Institutional support for faculty development increases consistent implementation of the cycle	Faculty development; implementation fidelity	Multilevel study of courses nested in programmed	Implementation unrelated to institutional support

Source: Construction based on conceptual synthesis

The model answers the first research question by showing that the three traditions converge on a shared concern with the student's inner process of making moral meaning, while they diverge in what they treat as the primary driver of that process. The reasoning tradition privileges cognitive structure, the experiential tradition privileges engagement with real situations, and the humanistic tradition privileges relational climate. The divergence is productive rather than contradictory. Each tradition explains a different necessary condition, and none explains sufficient conditions on its own. This reading is consistent with the knowledge-action gap literature, which concludes that single-component explanations of moral functioning are inadequate (Darnell et al., 2019; Narvaez, 2010).

The answer to the second research question positions the Character Reasoning Model in relation to existing frameworks. Lickona (1991) identified the components of good character but left the mechanism that unites them underspecified. The neo-Kohlbergian and phronesis models clarify psychological components yet were developed primarily as accounts of moral functioning rather than as designs for teaching (Kristjánsson et al., 2021; Rest et al., 1999). Programmed in Anglo-American universities offer strategies that work, such as exemplars, reflection, and friendship, but they are often presented as a list of practices (Brooks et al., 2019; Lamb et al., 2022). The present model differs in two respects. It treats moral reasoning as the hinge through which experience is turned into personal meaning, which keeps the cognitive core of Kohlberg's legacy while avoiding a rigid stage hierarchy. It also treats humanizing relationships as an enabling condition rather than as an optional climate, which aligns the model with evidence on learner-centered relationships and internalization (Cornelius-White, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The four-phase cycle supplies the missing link between components and practices.

The model also addresses a concern that a humanistic orientation may slide into relativism. Character reasoning does not ask students to invent values from nothing. In the Indonesian setting Pancasila remains the normative horizon of compulsory civic education, and the model shifts the question from whether students can recite these values to whether they can justify, apply, and revise their commitment to them in real situations. Reasons that are examined in dialogue tend to be held more firmly than rules accepted on authority, a point anticipated by the self-authorship literature and by research on purpose (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Colby, 2020; Damon, 2008). Freire (2005) made a similar argument when he contrasted dialogue with the depositing of ready-made content. The humanistic reorientation strengthens rather than weakens normative commitment because it relocates authority from external enforcement to internally understood reasons.

The third research question concerns implications for Indonesian higher education. At the course level, Pancasila and Civic Education classes can be organized around constitutional and everyday moral dilemmas, project citizen and service-learning assignments, and reflective journals that follow the encounter, deliberation, dialogue, and enactment cycle. Existing national innovations such as modified project citizen, local wisdom programmed, and blended civic learning already provide the encounter phase (Cahyono et al., 2024; Hidayati et al., 2020; Trisiana et al., 2019). What the model adds is explicit attention to deliberation and dialogue and to the relational conditions that make them possible. Assessment would move from checklists of displayed values towards evidence of reasoning quality, such as the justification of positions in case analyses and the development visible in reflective portfolios. At the institutional level the model implies faculty development in dialogic and caring pedagogy, since lecturers who are expected to facilitate moral dialogue need opportunities to develop that capacity themselves (Allman et al., 2024; Palmer, 1998). Student organizations, community engagement programmed, and dormitory life can be treated as learning spaces in Kolb and Kolb's (2005) sense rather than as extracurricular additions.

The model also resonates with resources internal to Indonesian civic culture. The fourth principle of Pancasila places deliberation guided by wisdom at the Centre of collective decision making, which corresponds closely to the deliberation and dialogue phases. The practice of mutual cooperation offers a natural setting for the encounter and enactment phases, and local wisdom traditions already provide narratives and exemplars that can be examined rather than merely recited (Hidayati et al., 2020). These correspondences suggest that a humanistic reorientation does not require importing a foreign ideal. It can be framed as a recovery of deliberative and communal elements that are already present in the national value system. The relational condition of the model is demanding where classroom relations are strongly hierarchical, since students may hesitate to disagree with lecturers. Lecturers carry particular responsibility for signalling that reasoned disagreement is welcome, a responsibility that the literature on care and authenticity describes in detail (Noddings, 2012; Palmer, 1998; Rogers, 1983).

A related concern is the boundary between education and indoctrination. A model that gives lecturers a strong role as exemplars and facilitators could be misused to steer students towards predetermined conclusions. The literature offers two safeguards. Role modelling becomes educative when educators disclose and invite scrutiny of the reasons behind their conduct (Sanderse, 2013), and dialogue is educative when both parties remain open to learning from each other (Freire, 2005). The Character Reasoning Model builds these safeguards into the dialogue phase. Students are expected to justify their positions, and lecturers are expected to justify theirs. Character education in this sense remains compatible with academic freedom, a concern that has accompanied the revival of character education in universities (Brant et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2015).

Implementation can be considered at three levels. At the micro level a single course can adopt the four-phase cycle in a series of units, each organized around a moral or civic problem. At the meso level a study programmed can map the cycle across courses, field practice, and community engagement, which allows students to revisit similar questions with increasing complexity over several semesters (Mayhew et al., 2016). At the macro level institutional policies on curriculum, student affairs, and staff development can be aligned with the model, which makes the values a university claims in its vision the same values that students reason about and practise. Programmed that integrate faculty development, coursework, and co-curricular experience illustrate how such alignment can be pursued (Allman et al., 2024; Brooks et al., 2019; Colby et al., 2003).

Assessment deserves particular attention because it signals to students what an institution truly values. When character is assessed through attendance, observed politeness, or recall of value definitions, students learn that character means compliance. The model suggests three complementary forms of evidence. Reasoning quality can be examined through structured case analyses and, for research purposes, through established instruments grounded in neo-Kohlbergian theory (King & Mayhew, 2002; Rest et al., 1999). Growth in purpose and moral identity can be traced through measures and interviews of the kind used in recent university character programmed (Mendonça et al., 2024). Reflective portfolios can document how students move through the cycle over a semester. These forms of evidence are formative rather than punitive and are consistent with the relational climate that the model requires.

The digital environment adds a further layer. Students now encounter many moral situations online, including misinformation, polarizing content, and anonymous hostility, and Indonesian scholars have

argued that character education must respond to these conditions (Triyanto, 2020). Digital media can also serve the cycle, for example by supporting project citizen activities (Trisiana et al., 2019) or asynchronous discussions that extend dialogue beyond the classroom (Cahyono et al., 2024). The model implies that technology should be judged by whether it enriches encounter, deliberation, dialogue, and enactment rather than by whether it delivers value content more efficiently. Research on technology-enabled social and emotional learning for university educators points in the same direction while warning that cultural responsiveness and long-term effects are still poorly understood (Mukhemar et al., 2025).

The model has a specific significance for civic education as a field. Civic education in Indonesia has long been expected to form good citizens, and its scholarship has tended to treat civic character as a set of dispositions to be internalized through instruction and habituation (Dewi et al., 2020; Trisiana et al., 2019). The Character Reasoning Model connects civic character with the capacities that democratic life actually requires, such as weighing public reasons, listening to opposing views, and acting responsibly in community. Colby et al. (2003) argued that moral and civic development in higher education are intertwined because both depend on understanding, motivation, and skills that are learned through practice and reflection. The model makes this intertwining explicit. A student who learns to deliberate about a local policy dispute is at once developing moral judgement and civic competence, and the relational climate that protects honest disagreement in class is a small-scale rehearsal of a democratic public sphere. Civic education can be understood not only as a carrier of national values but also as a primary site of character reasoning in the university.

The model also clarifies what a holistic-humanistic reorientation does not mean. It does not mean replacing the cognitive rigor of moral education with emotional comfort, nor does it mean abandoning shared values in favor of individual preference. The literature reviewed here consistently links humanistic relationships with higher rather than lower expectations, since care and trust allow students to face difficult questions that they would avoid under threat (Cornelius-White, 2007; Noddings, 2012). Holism in this sense refers to the integration of thinking, feeling, and acting within one formative process, and humanism refers to the recognition of students as agents of that process. Both commitments are compatible with demanding standards of justification and with the normative horizon of Pancasila.

The theoretical contribution of the study lies in moving the discussion from the juxtaposition of theories to the specification of a mechanism. Earlier work in Indonesia has tended to propose integrative models whose components are listed but whose relations are not theorized (Dewi et al., 2020; Nur et al., 2021). The Character Reasoning Model states how the components relate and under which conditions their interaction is expected to be strongest. It also connects international evidence from university character programmed with the specific institutional structure of Indonesian compulsory courses, a connection that remains rare in both bodies of literature. The model is consistent with calls to integrate social-emotional and character development with academic learning (Elias, 2009) and with the observation that humanizing pedagogy in higher education still needs clearer frameworks (Mapaling & Hoelson, 2022).

The propositions also indicate how future studies could be designed. The first proposition can be examined by comparing course sections that use the full cycle with sections that use value instruction, measuring change in postconventional reasoning with instruments derived from the neo-Kohlbergian tradition (Rest et al., 1999). The second proposition requires measures of relational climate, such as perceived autonomy support and teacher empathy, which have well-established theoretical grounding (Cornelius-White, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The third proposition is best examined through mixed methods that combine measures of reasoning and self-reported moral action with qualitative analysis of classroom dialogue. The fourth proposition calls for multilevel designs in which courses are nested within programmed that differ in their investment in faculty development (Allman et al., 2024). Such studies would also allow the model to be refined or rejected, which is the appropriate fate of a conceptual proposal.

The study has limitations. As a non-empirical conceptual study, it does not provide evidence of effectiveness, and its claims are bounded by the quality and coverage of the corpus. The corpus is purposive and draws mainly on English-language and Indonesian-language sources, which may underrepresent other traditions of moral education, including religious and Asian philosophical traditions that are relevant to Indonesian students. Much of the international evidence on university character programmed comes from a small number of institutions in the United States and the United Kingdom (Brant et al., 2022; Lamb et al., 2022). The propositions are offered as hypotheses rather than as conclusions. Future research should

test them through quasi-experimental studies in compulsory civic education courses, longitudinal studies of students' reasoning and identity across the undergraduate years, and qualitative studies that examine how lecturers and students experience the dialogue phase in culturally specific ways.

CONCLUSION

This study formulated a conceptual framework of character education in higher education grounded in character reasoning as a reorientation from a normative-instructional paradigm towards a holistic-humanistic approach. The integrative review of 52 sources showed that moral development theory, experiential character education, and humanistic-relational pedagogy converge on the student's inner process of making moral meaning but each explains only one necessary condition of character formation. The resulting Character Reasoning Model integrates the three foundations by positioning moral reasoning as the hinge that turns campus experience into personal moral commitment under the condition of humanizing relationships, operationalized through a four-phase cycle of encounter, deliberation, dialogue, and reflective enactment. The novelty of the study lies in specifying this mechanism, translating it into the context of Indonesian compulsory courses and campus culture, and deriving four testable propositions. Universities, and Pancasila and Civic Education courses in particular, can apply the model by designing dilemma-based and community-based learning, assessing reasoning quality rather than displayed compliance, and investing in faculty capacity for dialogic and caring pedagogy. Future studies are needed to test the propositions empirically and to enrich the model with moral traditions rooted in Indonesian culture.

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