

A Hero Within: a review

By [Rebecca Haden](#)

Part of the impetus toward 21st century skills instruction comes from business and employers. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that young workers need constant validation just to perform their basic tasks. The *New York Times* quotes claims that we're "a nation of slackers." *The Boston Globe* frets over the disappearing American work ethic. Employers complain that graduates of our schools aren't prepared for the working world, while teachers attempt to work with diminishing resources, moving targets, and curricula that often has so little to do with the real world as we know it that our class time takes on a tinge of the surreal.

A growing number of business leaders say they want to see schools teaching character issues like hard work, self-discipline, and responsibility, as well as problem solving, creativity, and entrepreneurial skills. Sometimes this wins them hostility from teachers who are struggling to get everyone clear on estimation or the use of the semi-colon, while also spending eight weeks of every year on tests.

Paul Vitale, a corporate trainer and motivational speaker, has a solution: [A Hero Within](#), a curriculum designed to be used by an entire school over the course of three years. The package is coordinated with NCLB requirements, incorporates basic math and literacy skills, uses collaborative and project-based learning, and is intended to be used with little to no prep time required.

There are three components to A Hero Within. First, "The Inner Workings of a Hero" contains 18 lessons on the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills required for personal success. Many of us do units on heroes, and this one takes it a step further, encouraging students to strive for personal success. The lessons are broken into four major divisions:

- Self discovery
- Confronting realities of life
- Exploring possibilities
- Live life like you mean it

An early lesson examines the notion of honesty. The lesson begins with a "bell ringer" or opening question asking students to consider what they'd do if they were given too much change by a cashier. There is a reading passage on honesty and reputation, followed by discussion questions suited either to class or small group discussion, or to use as writing prompts. The questions range from personal questions like, "Do you feel you are a person of integrity? Explain your reasoning" to more abstract questions such as, "If something is gained dishonestly, does it really belong to you?" and problem solving questions like, "What if you are teased because of your honesty?"

The lesson continues with scenarios for discussion and reproducibles asking for direct application of the concepts which have been presented and discussed, with both individual and group activities.

The second component of the training is "Providing Heroic Customer Service." Whether your students plan to be doctors, lawyers, genetic counselors, or systems analysts, they'll provide service to and interact with customers. Since Vitale's prescription for customer service revolves around respect and communication, this component is beneficial for everyone, as well as offering a tangible starting point for those entrepreneurial skills lessons so many of us find mystifying.



Class and individual activities ask students both to be conscious of their own behavior as consumers and to imagine themselves as business owners and workers. Specific activities for this component include designing a coupon, exploring the kinds of complaints people make, and developing a plan for coping with angry customers. The lessons connect schoolroom skills with real-world scenarios, and are likely to prepare students for after school job interviews as well as helping them think about themselves as future workers or business owners.

The third component is “Presenting a Heroic Message,” focusing on self-presentation, group dynamics, and public speaking. Author Vitale is a sought-after public speaker who trains corporate leaders to present themselves and their products well, and this component shares his expertise. It is, therefore, a very practical and specific approach to preparing and delivering an effective presentation. It’s also about self-presentation. We’ve all had students who shine in college entrance interviews and equally able students who sabotage themselves; this section of “A Hero Within” can level the playing field.

The teaching materials are in a binder, and there is a PowerPoint presentation to go with them. There are resource and audio CDs, posters and stickers, and other supporting materials. The package also includes class sets of two of Vitale’s books: Pass It On, a collection of inspiring quotations, and Are You Puzzled by the Puzzle of Life?

The second book provides extensive reading passages for the lessons, as well as further quotations that can serve as writing prompts. It’s written in an easy, down home style with lots of personal stories from Vitale’s youth, and should be comfortable reading for middle school and up. It doesn’t talk down to readers, though, and could be read with value by adults as well.

One of the things that I particularly like about Vitale’s materials is the realistic optimism they convey. Most of us graduated to a “future so bright I gotta wear shades,” but the older teens in my classes often feel that they have few options. Last week, one of my classes reviewed data on the “job” of being a drug dealer from Stephen Levitt’s Freakonomics, including below minimum wage starting income and a 25% chance of death in the first four years of employment. I’m sorry to say that a significant proportion of the students felt that it would be a good alternative to the work they foresaw doing or the jobs they currently hold. This degree of pessimism won’t lead to success in the global marketplace.

Yet our students’ life experiences may make them unreceptive to the average “Be All You Can Be” rhetoric. Vitale’s blend of positive outlook and practical steps toward reaching that positive outcome offers a believable alternative.

Paul Vitale’s website offers more information about the curriculum and about his school and teacher trainings. There’s also a survey (at this writing) about student fears — add your voice.

About the Curriculum Author

All around the globe, organizations turn to the expertise of nationally acclaimed professional speaker, trainer and author, Paul Vitale. With extensive knowledge in the areas of leadership, customer service, sales, character development and self-improvement, Paul’s stress on the importance of a positive attitude, strong work ethic and other vital ideas enables individuals to rediscover key concepts and lessons that assist them in defining their own unique paths toward success and happiness. Since founding Vital Communications, Inc. in 1996, Paul has authored a number of books, developed several curriculums and delivered his message of affirmation to hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life. For additional information, visit paulvitale.com or call 501-663-1454 or 501-868-8195.