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The Phenomenon of Character Development in a Distance Education Course

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Abstract

Rarely are character development-related aims espoused by higher education reflected in the design and delivery of distance education programs. Further, literature exploring the character development aspects of distance education is sparse. This study finds that the instructor and students in a fantasy literature distance course perceived myriad kinds of character development related to performance, moral, relational, and spiritual character traits and strengths. This paper considers implications for character development in distance education and directions for future research.

Historically, character development has been an important outcome of higher education (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999; Bowen, 1977; Boyer, 1987; Chickering, 2006; Dalton, Russell, & Kline, 2004). As Boyer (1987) stated,

> We need educated men and women who not only pursue their own personal interests but are also prepared to fulfill their social and civic obligations. And it is during the undergraduate experience, perhaps more than any other time, that these essential qualities of mind and character are refined. (p. 7)

More broadly, some theorists, philosophers, and scholars have stated that education is itself a moral endeavor—and consequently, the moral implications and effects, for better or worse, on students' character development are unavoidable (Balmert & Ezzell, 2002; Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999; Carr, 2005; Lewis, 1965).

However, despite the growth in distance education (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004), researchers have sparsely addressed character development in the distance education context. Our task in this paper was to explore an instructor's and students' experiences in a distance education course in which students have reported some character development related to taking the course. The authors hope to inform the practice of instructors and designers vis-à-vis the development of character in distance education courses, although more studies will be needed to develop the basis for a theory or model. To this end, this article provides a description of the research methods and data sources used in examining character development in a distance education course on Fantasy Literature, which integrates moral- and character-related themes into the

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course, in order to identify instructor and student perceptions of the character development that occurred in their distance education course.

Methods and Data Sources

Because there is little research that attends to the connections between character development and distance education (for one example, see Howell, Allred, Laws, & Jordan, 2004), much research remains to be done to understand how instructors and designers can help students develop their character. As van Manen (1990) explained, the best place to begin the development of pedagogical theory is the examination of the particularities of an individual case:

> Pedagogical theory has to be *theory of the unique*, of the particular case. Theory of the unique starts with and from the single case, searches for the universalities, and returns to the single case. (p. 150)

Thus this article describes aspects of a particular case.

Howell et al. (2004) studied Brigham Young University's (BYU) Independent Study Program using student course evaluations and a portfolio assignment from a capstone course to discover if the Independent Study program was helping accomplish the Aims of a BYU Education (BYU, 2003), one of which is "character building" or developing character. The authors concluded that BYU's Independent Study program contributed significantly toward the achievement of the BYU aims. However, as Lemming (2000) declared, "simply to know that a programme 'works' without understanding why is of little practical value" (pp. 424–425). To attempt to understand why students felt that they were experiencing character development in the Independent Study program, the authors began by looking closely at one course.

To find a course with a sufficient number of potential participants who felt they experienced "character building" or character development, we used "intensity sampling" (Patton, 2002, p. 234), which entails selecting cases that "manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely" (p. 234). We included courses with a minimum of 100 responses (to provide a sufficiently large pool of potential participants) on the course evaluation from November 16, 2001, to August 7, 2006. Although any of the top-rated courses might have sufficed for the study, we narrowed the potential pool to those courses that rated above six on a seven-point scale for character building.

From these courses, we selected the course on Christian Fantasy Literature because it was the highest rated course that was not specifically a religion, ethics, or self-improvement course. The course deals with the genre of fantasy literature and features the works of C. S. Lewis (*The Screwtape Letters* and a work of the student's choosing) and J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings* trilogy). Although the emphasis is on literature analysis, we discovered during the study that the instructor also addresses moral and character issues inherent in the literature of any genre.

The first author collected data to discover the perceived types of character development. The primary source of data collection was a series of in-depth conversational interviews (Spradley, 1980; van Manen, 1990) with the course instructor and 14 former students. These interviews consisted of asking the instructor at a high level regarding (a) what goals he had in relationship to character development, (b) his general experiences as the instructor of the course, and (c) what, if any, character development he had observed in his students.

The student interviews consisted of discussing (a) their general impressions of the course, (b) what they felt they gained from taking the course, (c) whether they felt the course

was "character building," and (d) if so, in what ways they felt they had developed their character as part of their course experience. Additionally, follow-up interviews were conducted through email conversations to pursue issues that emerged during analyses.

The course materials (including the literary works that they read) and the students' assignments, where possible, were used as secondary forms of data (to confirm or bring into question themes that emerged from the interview data). Although some interpretation was inevitable, the researchers attempted to remain open to participant descriptions (Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2003) and sought to understand the emic perspective (Patton, 2002; Williams, n.d.).

A combination of holistic, selective, and detailed approaches to the thematic analyses was conducted (van Manen, 1990, 2002). Van Manen (1990) defines a theme as "the experience of focus, of meaning, of point" (p. 87). Thus, after several passes through the data, themes related to the study's questions were identified. The researchers also conducted a *taxonomic* (Spradley, 1980) or *hierarchical analysis* to organize the themes in a way to show the relationship between themes. This process was done for the interview data of each individual and then the resulting analyses were combined to create an overall analysis of the various individual cases. The secondary forms of data were used to obtain a richer view of the themes arising from the interview data, for negative case analysis, and to elicit discussion in follow-up interviews.

Primarily through written correspondence, brief summaries of the emerging themes for each individual participant as well as collective themes—which van Manen (1990) calls "phenomenologically sensitive paragraphs" (p. 96)—were used to involve participants in the analysis or "interpretation through conversation" (p. 97). Participants and the lead researcher entered conversation, through a process of questioning and answering, and thus created a common language that allows for the understanding of lived experience (Gadamer, 2004). This process also served as extended member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.), only it invites participants to become more like co-investigators (van Manen, 1990). Likewise, the findings were also discussed with other researchers and instructional design professionals in order to generate collaborative analysis (van Manen, 1990), similar to peer debriefings used to check the trustworthiness of results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.). Finally, the first author conducted a post hoc analysis to compare emerging themes from the study with related themes in the literature to finalize the terminology that was used. Participants also had the opportunity to respond to this final round of analysis.

To establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Williams, n.d.), the following methods were used: prolonged engagement, triangulation (of the various interviews from both student and instructor perspectives as well as comparing emerging themes with course materials and student assignments, etc.), member checks, negative case analysis, and peer debriefings. To enhance transferability, quotes and rich descriptions were used. Although this study is not designed to generalize to all teaching situations, nor even to all distance teaching situations, the understanding that this study provides can potentially help people be more thoughtful, tactful, and sensitive in their activities as instructional designers, instructors, or learners in a distance education context. We intend the richness of the quotations and discussion to allow readers to draw their own conclusions about how the important themes of the participants' experiences are applicable in their own situations. As van Manen (1990) explained, a good phenomenological study should invite the readers' participation and reflection. To enhance dependability and confirmability, an audit trail was maintained and member checks and peer debriefings were conducted (during follow-up interviews, etc.). Additionally, Williams (n.d.) added other criteria, including (a) conducting a meaningful study, (b) treating participants ethically, and (c) completing a well-written report, which were also employed.

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Perceptions of Character Development

Berkowitz (2002) suggests that making determination of character and character development is "tricky":

> First, . . . character is a multifaceted phenomenon. Second, the components of character each have their own developmental trajectories. Third, each person develops at a different rate. Fourth, the developmental sequence and profile of the components of character differ in different individuals. Finally, the components of character tend to develop gradually, or in stages over a long period of time. (p. 49)

In this study, we attempted only to determine what kinds of character development participants perceived. We did not attempt to determine if a quantifiable difference had actually occurred in these perceived areas during the time each student participated in the course.

The participants perceived character development in a myriad of ways. To make sense of their perceptions of character development, we drew on Davidson, Lickona, & Khmelkov (2008) and Lickona and Davidson's (2005) distinction between *performance character* and *moral character*. Also, two additional subcategories of moral character emerged from the data that emphasized *relational* and *spiritual* aspects of character. Thus we organized the participants' views of character development in traits and strengths into four areas: (a) performance character traits and strengths, (b) moral character traits and strengths, (c) relational character traits and strengths, and (d) spiritual character traits and strengths.

Performance Character Traits and Strengths

Davidson et al. (2008) discussed the importance of fostering not only moral character but also "performance character" (p. 373). They explained the rationale for including performance character in their definition of character:

> We came to realize that character isn't just about "doing the right thing" in an ethical sense; it is also about doing our best work. If that is true, then character education isn't just about helping kids get along; it is about teaching them to work hard, develop their talents, and aspire to excellence in every area of endeavor. (p. 373)

Similar to Davidson et al.'s (2008) and Lickona and Davidson's (2005) concept of performance character, participants perceived improvements in six traits or strengths that seem to support the development of performance character: (a) self-discipline and self directedness in learning, (b) analytical and deeper approach to learning, (c) imagination and creativity, (d) appreciation of literature, (e) motivation to continue their education, and (f) self-confidence.

Self-discipline. In this category of response, students typically referred to an increase in their purposefulness and resolve to accomplish a given task, specifically as it related to their "performance character" (Davidson et al., 2008). Their responses also reflected a new-found ability to do something challenging and withstand difficulty in which they exhibited a "voluntary continuation of goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 229). This trait was inherent to the course (given the nature of independent study) and also explicitly attended to by the instructor. He expected that students would learn to take charge of their own learning and become more self-directed and self-disciplined:

> I thought a challengingly inviting independent study course could, minimally, help students realize they were in charge of their own learning enough to discipline themselves

> through a course where they had to motivate and pace [themselves] and bring to fruition their own study. At the least I hoped students would come out of the course better disciplined, more self-starting and proactively engaged in their own education. (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Accordingly, students took charge of their own learning and perceived character growth and development in this context. As a student reported, "[taking the course] made me realize that I had the self-discipline to do independent study" (personal communication, October 6, 2007). Another student shared, "[An independent study course] challenges people to be self-motivated. You have to set your own schedule . . . if you don't get things done it falls back on one person" (personal communication, August 30, 2007).

Analytical and deep approach to learning. Some participants said that they developed their character through becoming better learners. This view is consistent with Davidson et al.'s (2008) view of performance character and their developmental outcome of helping students become "lifelong learner[s] and critical thinker[s]" (p. 380). Ryan and Bohlin (1999) also stated that character consists of the "sum of our *intellectual* [italics added] and moral habits" (p. 5).

The instructor explained that one of his hopes for the students taking the course was for them to "take off with this kind of course, under the thrilling impetus of their own learning momentum, into some stratospheric educational territory" (personal communication, November 21, 2007). One student explained that her experience in the course helped her prepare in many ways for learning on her own as she transitioned from undergraduate to after-school life. Another student explained how the course helped him:

> [I] realize things that I don't know when I would usually think that I do. I am beginning to understand what I don't understand and what I need to study and what I need to look at, what I need to ponder about; all that was influenced by the course. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Many of the students perceived that they learned to better analyze literature and other media, which was one of the primary goals for the course. For example, one student stated that the course helped her become a little more thoughtful and take time to think about what she was reading more than she used to: "It helped me to understand that there are more aspects to fantasy writing and Christian literature than what you normally think of" (personal communication, October 3, 2007). She also reported that she used some of the analysis techniques she learned in this class in other courses, which deepened her understanding. Another student shared how the course helped her, "Basically what I took out of [the course] was looking at things in a different way. . . . this kind of helped me to think of [literature] in a different way" (personal communication, October 13, 2007).

Imagination and creativity. Imagination is an aspect of fantasy literature that instructor learned to appreciate from his study of Tolkien and Lewis, and he hoped to share that appreciation with his students. Peterson and Seligman (2004) included creativity as a character strength in their first virtue, "Wisdom and Knowledge" (p. 95). They explained that creativity means a person is capable of producing "ideas or behaviors" that are "original" or "novel" as well as "adaptive," or that they "make a positive contribution to that person's or to the life of others" (p. 95). One student stated,

> I think probably the biggest thing was the value put on imagination. I value it a lot more now and I encourage it a lot more now. Like my students in Taiwan that I taught special education that was definitely something that I wanted to instill in them is to use imagination. (personal communication, November 1, 2007)

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Four different students specifically discussed how the course inspired them to continue or begin new creative writing pursuits, two of which were fantasy stories.

Appreciation of literature. The instructor hoped to share his love for great literature and to help students not only to appreciate fantasy literature, but also to move into other great literature: "great literature itself with the invitation that it might even take them to better literature" (personal communication, October 9, 2007). Peterson and Seligman (2004) listed "appreciation of beauty and excellence" (p. 537) as a character strength that is part of the virtue they called "transcendence." Ryan and Bohlin (1999) also described "loving the good" (p. 46) as a goal of character education. These authors explained, "Loving the good is about educating students' feelings and passions so that they love the right things for the right reasons (for example, so that they learn to do their homework for the sake of learning rather than simply a grade)" (p. 46).

Although the students came into the course with varying levels of enthusiasm for fantasy, most of the students reported that they left the course with a greater appreciation for fantasy literature. For example, a student explained, "I had never been a huge fantasy fan, so I gained an appreciation for that" (personal communication, October 10, 2007). Another student said that she felt fantasy was "fluff" before she took the course. Now she sees fantasy as a more legitimate literary form and she gained a greater appreciation for Lewis and Tolkien. Other students had similar changes in their perspectives on fantasy literature and literature in general. The few students who did not report greater appreciation for fantasy as an outcome of the course mentioned that they already had a deep appreciation for fantasy literature before taking the course. In this case, students developed a passion for what they learned, beyond just memorizing material for a grade and moving on. As a student declared, "I think I got a B+ in the class. . . . Although I felt like what I got out of it was A+" (personal communication, October 2, 2007).

Motivation to continue education and learning. Peterson and Seligman's (2004) virtue of wisdom and knowledge specifically includes the character strength of a "love of learning" (p. 163). Also Davidson et al. (2008) recommended helping students to become lifelong learners as one of their developmental outcomes (also see Lickona & Davidson, 2005). Students and the instructor reported one of the outcomes of the course was an increased desire to learn. The instructor observed that he has seen students use the course as a bridge to further education, whether formally or informally:

> One thing for sure: at least two dozen students over the past two decades have used Christian fantasy as a bridge to return to higher education. Most of those were women who've raised families, and who didn't believe their mothering experience was as educative as it was until they proved it to themselves. . . . (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Several students in the study reported that because of the course they felt a desire to continue their learning. For example, one student shared that this course prompted her interest in pursuing a master's degree because her experience helped her see that not all education had to be the "drudgery" of reciting back rote learning. She saw instead that a course could give her "freedom" and encouragement to think for herself (personal communication, November 6, 2007). Another student discussed that the course helped renew her interest in pursuing her education:

> It helps me think of the goal of returning to school . . . I would like to be able to take the learning . . . from the class and these stories and share it with people and in my case doing a secondary education type of thing. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

One student also noted that this course served as a springboard for her lifelong learning:

> It was the last course of my degree of formal education [before] having to be personally responsible for my own learning going forward. It served as a step . . . to seek for what else I want to learn. (personal communication, July 19, 2007)

Self-confidence. Davidson et al. (2008) included the goal of helping students becoming more "emotionally and socially skilled [people]," which includes "possess[ing] a healthy self confidence and a positive attitude" (p. 380; also see Lickona & Davidson, 2005). Self-confidence, as the participants described it, is also similar to Bandura's (1997) discussion of self-efficacy, since their perceived self-confidence typically related to specific skills or tasks. As Bandura explained, self-efficacy is a key to learning new skills. Davidson et al. (2008) discuss helping students become lifelong learners who "aspire to excellence in every area of endeavor" or "develop their talents" (p. 373). In both cases, self-confidence (or self-efficacy) is helpful (Bandura, 1997). Additionally, Solomon, Watson, & Battistich (2001) discussed self-efficacy as an example of "personality factors" that may also increase the likelihood of "prosocial behavior" (p. 567).

The instructor also observed that students have experienced increased confidence as a result of their experiences in the course:

> I've observed some instances of character building through the Christian Fantasy course. Some of that is straightforward strengthening of self-confidence, as per the letter I received this week from [a former student]: "I loved the course. I have always struggled to believe in my ability to understand and interpret literature. I was ashamed and felt very inadequate and 'under read.' I wanted to stretch myself, to hush my recital of voices telling me I was not good enough. This course has changed me, blessed me with confidence and joy. I am able to see things as they were meant to be, not as I have experienced them in the past. What made this all possible? I believe it is the sharing of self that was expected. It was the adventure of escape from previously conceived notions of my own self. I will never be the same. I have learned to love reading through this course." (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Students reported increased confidence in many areas. For example, one student reported that her interactions with the instructor helped her be more confident in her own opinions and her ability to think and read and to analyze literature as well as to share her opinions about literature with others: "I did appreciate [the feedback and interactions with the instructor] because it made me feel that I am on the right track" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Another student said that she gained more confidence in her ability to write. This led her to begin thinking about working toward becoming a nurse practitioner, which takes a considerable amount of writing. One student shared, "It made me feel like I could do something like that [i.e., take other independent study courses and direct her own learning] if I wanted to. It gave me some self-confidence" (personal communication, October 6, 2007), which was important for her as she continued her educational pursuits. Another student also reported that she became more confident as a learner through her experience in the course:

> It seems to me that "self-confidence" doesn't really define what is going on here. It isn't just feeling more confidence, but learning to trust your own ability to think. This should be the ultimate goal of education because it's going beyond gathering information to actually learning and learning to learn. You don't need a teacher to tell you what to think anymore—how sad that it is such a rare experience for a teacher to encourage students to think for themselves. (personal communication, July 15, 2008)

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Some students reported becoming more confident as writers. For example, one student said that the course gave her "a lot of encouragement as a reader and writer" (personal communication, October 2, 2007). Additionally, one student explained that seeing how the instructor taught the course helped him improve as a teacher.

Moral Character Traits and Strengths

Lickona and Davidson (2005) described three components of moral character: awareness, attitude, and action. Students perceived development of traits and strengths in moral character similar to these three components: (a) moral desires or motivation, (b) moral discernment, and (c) moral courage.

Moral desires. Student responses related to moral desires and motivation suggested how the course helped them to "[prioritize] moral values over other personal values" (Bebeau, Rest, & Narvaez, 1999, p. 22), alter the values of their "moral anatomy" (Berkowitz, 2002, p. 48), and to "love the good" (Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; see also Lickona, 1999). Primarily, students stated that the course helped them want to be better people and to desire to choose what is right, good, and virtuous. For example, one student explained, "As I walk away from the course it made me realize that I can be an influence for good in my home, in my community" (personal communication, October 3, 2007). And two others said that reading Tolkien inspired them to want to stand up for good things in their life, to be noble. Yet another student expressed a similar sentiment:

> It is not always easy to do the right thing and be on the right side. Sometimes it is easier to fall and be on the wrong side. Just to see everything that [the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*] gave up for the good would strengthen my own thoughts that it is not always easy and sometimes it does take sacrifice to be on the side of good. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Likewise, another student reported that she came away with the basic desire to "not to give into evil and hold on to the good even if the odds are against you" (personal communication, November 1, 2007). Finally, one student explained that the course helped him desire to not only be a better person, but to also be a greater asset to society:

> [The course] has inspired me to do better, to be better, and act better . . . It is not the first thing that I think of, "Hey there is litter on the side of the road I should pick it up, that is what Lewis and Tolkien would want me to do." It doesn't come into play that way, but it definitely builds a desire to be better and to act better. (personal communication, October 10, 2007)

He also shared that there were few other courses at the university that would top this course in helping people want to change themselves.

Moral discernment. Many of the student responses related to the category of moral discernment implied the development of wisdom "to discern correctly, to see what is truly important in life. . ." (Lickona, 2003, p. 2). The responses also intimated a "moral sensitivity" to decisions between right and wrong and the moral implications of those decisions (Bebeau et al., 1999; Rest, 1986). Importantly, moral discernment was a specific objective of the course. As the instructor shared: "I wanted the course to be . . . an opening up of entirely new ways to read not just of fantasy or even of the best literature, but *how to read life*" (personal communication, November 21, 2007, emphasis added).

Students described being able to see more clearly and more sensitively distinguish between what they described as good and evil. For example, a student shared the fact that in addition to analyzing literature and media for meaning, this course helped her assess whether it is good, worthwhile, and truly important: "... and when I have gone to movies it [what she learned in the course] has helped me decide what is virtuous and lovely and what to avoid. Not the only thing, but a factor" (personal communication, July 19, 2007). She further explained that the course has helped her to be more purposeful in deciding not only what kinds of media to participate in but also to be more mindful about which messages are worth heeding and applying personally. On a similar note, another student commented on how her experience in the course helped her self-evaluate, "I can maybe be more mindful not to let those things pull me away from God and to certainly see where some of those had in the past" (personal communication, October 17, 2007). And another student expressed how the course changed her pattern of thinking about moral issues, specifically the way she addresses her own self-change and improvement:

> It helped me think about the way I think about things. And so I was impressed to have that look inside myself and be able to see what I could do to become better. I was really glad for that. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

Moral courage. Along with developing the self-discipline to follow through and accomplish a difficult task, students also suggested that they developed an increased capacity "to do *what is right* in the face of difficulty" (Lickona, 2003, p. 2, emphasis added). Their responses reflected newly discovered strengths of bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, some of the students shared specific examples where the course influenced them to stand up for the right or choose wisely. A student shared the story of his boss who put a lot of pressure on him to do things her way rather than the way he feels is best for his students. He mused, "Contemplating the principles that were taught in this course have helped me to stand up further to some of the nonsense that I face in my job" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Another participant also had a situation where her bosses were putting pressure on their employees to conduct themselves unethically. She said that the course helped her be more resolute and stand up to their pressure: "This course wouldn't be the only thing that contributed to that but I certainly would say it influenced me" (personal communication, July 20, 2007). And another student shared that some of her friends do not think highly of Christians. Since taking the course she said, "I was actually defending it [to them]" (personal communication, August 30, 2007) and she used what she had learned from C. S. Lewis to help her. Other students reported making better choices regarding what literature and media to participate in and spending more and higher quality time with family.

Relational Character Traits and Strengths

Davidson et al. (2008) noted that their concept of moral character has a "relational orientation" (p. 373). Lickona and Davidson (2005) also stated, "[moral character] consists of those qualities—such as integrity, justice, caring, and respect—needed for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical behavior" (p. 18), although the authors explained that these qualities did not constitute an exhaustive list. Participants in the study mentioned waysin which they perceived their character development that seem consistent with the relational aspect or orientation of moral character.

Participants discussed four ways in which they felt they developed their character related to relational character traits and strengths: (a) becoming more open-minded and understanding of

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other perspectives, (b) sharing what they were learning with others, (c) improving communication with others, and (d) improving relationships generally.

Open-mindedness. Another reported that the character-building aspect of the course was open-mindedness. Student responses related to this category suggested that the course assisted students in "thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 29). One student, for example, recalled how C. S. Lewis's writings about Christianity caused him to explore more deeply others' beliefs as well as his own, and another student stated that she gained new perspectives on religion and human nature from reading and analyzing the literature.

Students discussed specific examples of how they displayed their new-found open-mindedness. For example, one student said that she gained an appreciation for the authors' (Tolkien and Lewis) perspectives and that doing so changed and extended her way of thinking. She expressed that this new appreciation and open-mindedness helped her become more understanding of others. She cited the instance of helping a young lady at her work who had made some bad choices. In particular, she overcame her tendency to be irritated with, judge, or write off this person, and she was able to be more sympathetic and helpful to her:

> It definitely makes me take a step back and say this person is different than me and what they are thinking is completely opposite of what I am thinking and that gives me enough perspective to step back and say, "Ok, let me try and understand from this person's perspective." (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Another student recalled that she felt that many of Lewis's beliefs coincided with her own and that her experience in the course opened up some opportunities to talk with others about common beliefs. She described the experience,

> While volunteering in school I come in contact with several women who are of various faiths and I think this helped me to appreciate and see the commonalities we all share and appreciate them more. In fact, several of them had read *Screwtape* and we were able to discuss our perspectives on what Lewis thought and believed. (personal communication, March 12, 2008)

On a similar note, another student stated that although she had departed from the religious ideas that her parents taught her growing up, this course helped her gain a new appreciation for Christianity. She said she is less apt to judge those who profess to be Christians. Additionally, she shared, "This course helped me talk to [my mother] a lot more about Christianity and understand where she is coming from" (personal communication, August 30, 2007).

Sharing of learning with others. Another way in which students expressed that they improved their relationships with others was through sharing what they learned. For the most part, they shared with the intent to help and serve others. These views on sharing are similar to Davidson et al.'s (2008) concept of caring, which was part of their concept of moral character, as well as Ryan and Bohlin's (1999) outcome of loving the good, which included a "concern for the needs of others." It also corresponds to what Ryan and Bohlin said concerning "educating students' feelings and passions so that they love the right things for the right reasons" such as seeking to "give to others rather than to gain recognition" (p. 46). Peterson and Seligman (2004) included kindness as part of their virtue of humanity, and Lickona (2003) included love in his essential virtues, of which kindness was an element. Berkowitz (2002) included "altruism" as one of his "foundational characteristics" (p. 48). A few examples of this include the following. One student mentioned that when he shared insights to help others, "I made sure that I didn't

bring it up unless I felt that doing so would benefit the other person" (personal communication, March 1, 2008). Another student felt that sharing what she has learned in the course has helped her help others:

> I think it strengthened me as a mother... in terms of being better able to help my children, like if I had to give an example helping them with literary choices. Also in helping, like in my book group. I think I can help women in their understanding of another book and also strengthen them in other ways. (personal communication, October 3, 2007)

Another student, who is a teacher, stated that she has enriched her teaching by sharing what she learned from the course with her students: "I taught a semester on Science Fiction and Fantasy and we touched on both *LOTR* and *Screwtape Letters* so it was interesting to convey my experience to the students and also hear their experience from the literature as well" (personal communication, February 22, 2008).

Communication. A few students reported that the course helped them improve their communication with others. Lickona and Davidson (2005) and Davidson et al. (2008) included effective communication as a component of their foundational strength of becoming a "socially and emotionally skilled person" (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 380). Lickona's (1999) moral competence included listening and communication skills. Additionally, Solomon et al. (2001) discussed communication skills as an example of "behavioral competencies" that may make "prosocial behavior" (p. 567) more likely. For example, one student reported that working on the course together helped her and her husband get to know each other better, as they were still newlyweds when she took the course: "it helped us to communicate a little better" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Another student shared a similar thought about how the course improved his relationship with his wife:

> It has helped my relationship with my wife ... it has opened up new areas for us to talk of what we are seeing, understanding, and experiencing. It gives us additional points of reference for dialogue, it has helped us become closer because we developed a new area of common ground. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Relationships. Most directly associated with Davidson et al.'s (2008) "relational orientation" (p. 373) of moral character and Ryan and Bohlin's (1999) concept of loving the good, which they said included "concern for the needs of others, ... true friendship—and the habits necessary to attain it" (p. 46), some students reported that the course helped them generally improve and appreciate their relationships. One student said, "[the things he learned in the course] improved ... my relationship with my family members" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). Another reported that the example of the characters from the literature helped reinforce ideals she already held, such as "the importance of strong friendships" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). However, not all the students felt they developed their character in this way.

Spiritual Character Traits and Strengths

Davidson et al. (2008) and Lickona and Davidson (2005) both discussed the character strength of becoming "a spiritual person crafting a life of noble purpose" (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 380). Participants perceived that they developed in ways that appear to support the idea of becoming a more "spiritual person." Although the instructor did not specifically state that he intended to help students improve any particularly spiritual character traits or strengths, the subject of Christian fantasy is steeped in these themes. Students discussed four spiritually

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related traits or strengths in which they perceived development: (a) humility, (b) faith, (c) hope, and (d) charity.

Humility. Student responses related to humility suggested an explicit awareness of moral weaknesses and "a willingness to both recognize and correct [those] moral failings" (Lickona, 1999, p. 600). A few students explored humility in the course and said that it helped them in their understanding of humility or to feel more humble. One participant shared that her reading of the literature filled her with a sense of nobility yet humility. She shared, "You just read that and say I want to be like that and I want to feel that nobility and yet humbly knowing that I am nothing without a higher order of things helping me out" (personal communication, October 30, 2007). Another student admitted in an assignment, "Like Wormwood's patient [from *The Screwtape Letters*], I struggle with humility. I know what humility is and it has served my spiritual growth. But like the patient, I am tempted to find pride in that humility" (personal communication, October 13, 2007). He concluded his essay,

> Lewis through *The Screwtape Letters* reminds me of the battle I must do against false pride, especially spiritual pride. My greatest allies in the war against pride are not just my good wife and my friends, but also God, Christ and the Holy Ghost. (personal communication, October 13, 2007)

Although the course was not his sole inspiration in his battle to overcome pride and be more humble, he reported that it did serve as a reminder and helped clarify the battle for him.

Faith. Nearly every student said that the course experience helped strengthen his or her faith to some degree. Responses were similar to Peterson and Seligman's (2004) virtue of "transcendence," which they defined as encompassing "strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning," (p. 30) including the character strength of spirituality, within which they added "religiousness" and "faith" (p. 599). Building upon this idea of transcendence, other theorists discussed helping students become "spiritual person[s] engaged in crafting a life of noble purpose" (Davidson et al., 2008, p. 379) who "pursues deep, meaningful connections—to others, nature, a higher power [italics added], and so on" (Lickona & Davidson, 2005, p. 193). For example, one student reported that taking the course helped reinforce her belief in a Higher Power: "I definitely think, I was never an atheist, but my belief in a higher power was reinforced and brought full-circle. And it made me think about a lot of things" (personal communication, August 30, 2007). Another discussed that the experience strengthened her religious commitment; she felt that the course helped her come closer to Christ, understand her own beliefs, and see that intellect and faith can co-exist; "I think definitely for this class I gained an intellectual knowledge of religion and more connection with the head and the heart" (personal communication, November 1, 2007). Still another student felt that in addition to helping her enrich her study of the scriptures and reprioritize her life, which are very much related to improving her relationship with God, the course also strengthened her faith and her commitment to her beliefs. She explained, "I think that book [The Great Divorce], well, that class in general helped me to make up my mind and commit more fully to my faith and strengthen a side of my character that hadn't really been tapped into before" (personal communication, October 2, 2007). An additional student explained, "I would say that it was spiritually uplifting and insightful. It gave me some insights" (personal communication, September 27, 2007). Yet another noted, "So here you are and you are reading and learning all of this great literature stuff but at the same time you are strengthening your testimony in your own religion and strengthening your own beliefs in Christianity" (personal communication, October 10, 2007).

Hope. Although this trait was not mentioned frequently, some participants in the study specifically mentioned that the course helped them increase or fortify their hope. Their responses reflect a new-found "positive attitude" (Lickona, 2003) and an ability to "[think] about the future, [expect] that desired events and outcomes will occur, [and act] in ways believed to make them more likely" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 570). The instructor explained that he observed students whose learning experiences in the course have fortified their hope for the future:

> Learning at its best can affect character in other ways; [it] can even provide a kind of inoculation against the disappointments of life. One of my students described her character enhancement through the course in terms of *The Once and Future King*: "'The best thing for disturbances of the spirit,' replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, 'is to learn. That is the one thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love and lose your moneys to a monster. There is only one thing for it then: to learn. Learning is the thing for you.'" (personal communication, November 21, 2007)

Only two student participants in the study specifically mentioned that the course helped them increase or fortify their hope. One student said that from her reading of fantasy she, like the protagonists who usually receive help in moments of peril, can count on divine assistance when she is in need. This understanding helped her to tell herself, "OK, you know, I can make it through" (personal communication, October 30, 2007). The other student reported that his study of Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* inspired him. He felt personally that he had not lived up to his full potential, but that Aragorn's example gave him hope that he too can improve his situation or fulfill his destiny. Mort also mentioned that the "patient" from *The Screwtape Letters* inspired him in a similar way: "So that was interesting to see the weakness of the guy and yet God helping him in a sense. Then in the final end the decisions he makes are right and it all turns out all right" (personal communication, September 27, 2007).

Charity. Only one student specifically mentioned exploring the theme of charity and trying to work on having more charity. Although the literature does not specifically mention charity, the concept of charity is consistent with other terms. Peterson and Seligman's (2004) virtue of "humanity" includes the character strengths of "love" (p. 303) and "kindness" (p. 325). Lickona (2003) also included love as one of his essential virtues. The student discussed how her experience in the course helped her work through her feelings of frustration with her cousin. She saw, through her reading of *The Screwtape Letters*, the difference between unselfishness and charity. Essentially, Lewis (1996) explained that unselfishness focuses on the self, whereas charity looks outward and is concerned about others' needs. After considering how this idea applied to her and her feelings about her experience with her cousin, the student exclaimed, "C. S. Lewis's treatment of Unselfishness hit the spot. I finally saw myself and my motivations clearly! The problem has been identified and a remedy prescribed" (personal communication, November 1, 2007). Since the course, she has worked on having charity rather than trying to be unselfish. She explained, "[unselfishness versus charity] is something I have been thinking about now [since the course] because life is a continual process. Once something is brought to your life doesn't mean you have mastered it" (personal communication, November 1, 2007).

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Conclusion

In summary, the instructor and students perceived that the students had experienced character development in a variety of ways: (a) performance character traits and strengths of self-discipline and self-directedness in learning, analytical and deeper approach to learning, imagination and creativity, appreciation of literature, motivation to continue their education, and self confidence; (b) moral character traits and strengths of increasing moral desires, enhancing moral discernment, and moral courage; (c) relational character traits and strengths of open-mindedness, sharing learning with others, improving communication with others, and improving relationships; and (d) spiritual character traits and strengths of humility, faith, hope, and charity.

The breadth of student responses was matched only by their capacity to discuss character-related outcomes for the course. Most students did not have difficulty describing their experience in terms of the character development that might have occurred, and they displayed, somewhat surprisingly, a great facility for discussing their personal character traits—and how they were influenced by the course and instructor. Subsequently (and not surprisingly), students provided a wide variety of responses to character-related outcomes, and even though themes emerged from their responses, the character-building aspects of the course were unique to each student. That is, each student experienced the course in a personal way that mitigated the influence of the course on character-building aims. Thus, this study also offers important insight into student perceptions of character development that have long been missing from the literature on character development and education (see Osguthorpe, 2009).

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