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Pedagogical Considerations that May Encourage Character Development in a Distance Education Course

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Abstract

The aims espoused by institutions of higher education often entail the development of students' character. Rarely, however, are these character development aims connected to the unique design and delivery of distance education programs, and the research literature that explores the moral and character development aspects of distance education is sparse. This case study examines instructor and student perceptions of approaches, instructional methods, and other factors that contributed to perceived character development in a fantasy literature distance education course. The findings indicate that the instructor and students perceived myriad kinds of character development and corresponding approaches and methods for bringing about such development in the context of the course. This article considers possible implications for character development in the context of distance education and directions for future research.

As Johnson, Osguthorpe, and Williams (2010) explained, character development has historically been considered an important outcome of higher education (Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999; Bowen, 1977; Boyer, 1987; Chickering, 2006; Dalton, Russell, & Kline, 2004), and education is itself a moral endeavor (Balmert & Ezzell, 2002; Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Fekula, 1999; Carr, 2005; Lewis, 1965). Yet despite the growth in distance education (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004), researchers have sparsely addressed character development in distance education contexts. Instructors and designers concerned about character and moral issues have little guidance regarding ways to encourage character development in distance courses. This article connects between these seemingly disparate fields within higher education because as Balmert and Ezzell (2002) stated, "We cannot afford the moral order of distance education to be shaped by happenstance" (p. 54).

Our task 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. The authors of this article (a) describe research methods used to

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examine instructional methods in a distance education course on Fantasy Literature to integrate moral- and character-related themes into the course, (b) briefly identify instructor and student perceptions of character development they believe occurred in their distance education course, and (c) discuss instructor and student perceptions of the approaches and methods for bringing about the perceived character development in the context of the course as described in Johnson et al. (2010).

Methods and Data Sources

As Lemming (2000) declared, “simply to know that a programme ‘works’ without understanding why is of little practical value” (pp. 424–425). Howell, Allred, Laws, and Jordan (2004) reported that the BYU Independent Study program fulfills the aims of a BYU Education (2003), including a “character building” component. To attempt to understand why students feel they experience character development in this program and how they believe course experiences contribute, the authors examined one course closely.

As discussed in Johnson et al. (2010), the authors used “intensity sampling” (Patton, 2002, p. 234) to select one of the highest rated courses in the Independent Study program’s portfolio. This Christian Fantasy Literature course features 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 he emphasized literature analysis, the instructor also addressed moral and character issues inherent in literature of any genre.

The first author conducted a series of in-depth conversational interviews (Spradley, 1980; van Manen, 1990) with the course instructor and 14 former students to discover the types of character development they perceived, students experienced, and elements of the course participants felt contributed to character development. The instructor interviews consisted of questions regarding (a) his experience designing the course, (b) what his instructional approach was, (c) what goals he had in relationship to character development, (d) how he tried to help students achieve these goals, (e) his general experiences as the instructor of the course, and (f) what, if any, evidence of character development he had observed in his students.

The student interviews invited them to discuss (a) their general impressions of the course, (b) what they felt they gained from taking the course, (c) if they felt the course was “character building,” (d) if so, in what ways they felt they had developed their character as part of their course experience, and (e) what about their experience in the course helped contribute to their character development. Additionally, follow-up interviews were conducted through email conversations to pursue issues that emerged during analyses. Although some interpretation was inevitable, researchers attempted to remain open to interviewees’ descriptions (Fleming, Gaidys, & Robb, 2003) and emic perspectives (Patton, 2002; Williams, n.d.).

The course materials (including the literary works students read and papers they wrote) were used as secondary data to elucidate themes emerging from interview data, to obtain a richer view of themes arising from the interview data, for facilitating negative case analyses, and to elicit discussion in follow-up interviews.

A combination of holistic, selective, and detailed thematic analyses (van Manen, 1990, 2002) was conducted by reading through the data several times to identify themes related to the study’s questions. The researchers also conducted *taxonomic* (Spradley, 1980) *analyses* to identify relationships among themes. This process explored interview data from each individual, and resulting analyses combined themes across all cases.

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 first author entered conversation through a process of questioning and answering and thus created a common language that allowed for enhanced researcher understanding of interviewees’ lived experiences (Gadamer, 2004). This process also invited interviewees to engage in extended member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Williams, n.d.) by inviting them to become co-investigators (van Manen, 1990).

The findings were also discussed with other researchers and instructional design professionals to generate collaborative analyses (van Manen, 1990), through peer debriefings to check the credibility and 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 and invited participants to respond to this final round of analysis.

To further establish credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Williams, n.d.), an audit trail was maintained and prolonged engagement, triangulation (of the various interviews from both the student and instructor perspectives as well as comparing emerging themes with the course materials and student assignments), member checks, negative case analysis, and peer debriefings were conducted throughout the study.

To enhance transferability, quotes and rich descriptions were used. Although this study was not designed to generalize to all teaching situations, or even to all distance teaching situations, the deep understanding of the students’ experiences provided can potentially help people be more thoughtful, tactful, and sensitive in their activities as instructional designers, instructors, or learners in a distance education context. Through studying rich quotations and discussions, readers may draw their own conclusions about how the participants’ experiences apply to their own situations. As van Manen (1990) explained, a good phenomenological study should invite the readers’ participation and reflection.

Approaches and Instructional Methods

Previously (Johnson et al., 2010), we described how the instructor and students perceived that the students experienced character development in a variety of ways related to Davidson, Lickona, and Khmelkov’s (2008) and Lickona and Davidson’s (2005) discussion of moral character and performance character. First, we described perceived development in 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. Second, we described the participants’ perceived growth in moral character traits and strengths of increasing moral desires, enhancing moral discernment, and moral courage. Third, we described their perceived growth in relational character traits and strengths of open-mindedness, sharing learning with others, improving communication with others, and improving relationships. Finally, we also described their perceived development in spiritual character traits and strengths of humility, faith, hope, and charity.

Correspondingly, the instructor and students report that this character development is the result of three interrelated approaches to distance instruction. First, the instructor used the actual content of the course to facilitate the students’ reflection upon their character. Second, the instructor engaged students in an instructional conversation (Holmberg, 1986, 1999, 2003, also see Cheek, 1992; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Glanzer, 2008; Mason, 1993; Mills, 1988; Moore, 1997; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Smagorinsky, 2000). Finally, the instructor cared for the

individual student–instructor relationship (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Hambrecht, 2004; Lemming, 2000). In the context of this independent study course, these types and methods of character development were mitigated and enhanced by other factors, including the flexibility of time frame and location, as well as by student independence (Garrison, 2000; Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981), readiness, and agency.

The Course Content

Participants reported that the instructor placed emphasis on reading and discussing literature with (a) moral exemplars, (b) moral insights and themes, and (c) applicability to living a moral life (Cain, 2005; Carr, 2005; Lemming, 2000). According to the instructor and students, each of these, in turn, had an impact on the development of character. For example, the students perceived that the characters in these stories served as moral exemplars in a mythical realm. One student expressed,

When you read them and you get involved in their life and their travels and what's happening to them and how they handle things, it's almost as a role model as to how you want to be seen and you want to behave. (personal communication, October 17, 2007)

Students also mentioned the importance of moral insights and themes from the literature, explaining, “Well, fantasy . . . distills the battle between good and evil and you can see really clearly what was good and bad” (personal communication, November 1, 2007). Finally, the students suggested that the course content was character building because of its applicability in their lives. As one student explained, “That became a very exciting concept to me, a story about something that didn't actually happen but about something that was true, that was still a real story” (personal communication, July 20, 2007).

The Instructional Conversation

To enhance character building the instructor tried to make it as much like his on-campus course, as much like a discussion, as possible, stating, “I try to establish a genuine conversation” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). A student expressed, as did others, that her experience “was like a long-distance conversation” (personal communication, July 20, 2007). The participants described a variety of aspects of the instructional conversation that they considered influential in, both directly and indirectly, their character development. First, students felt that the instructor offered them meaningful choices (Holmberg, 1986; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981) in the learning experience that led to the development of character. As one student explained, having choices allowed her to focus on a specific character and explore certain character strengths, contributing to her growth in these areas. Second, students commented that the instructor's “good questions” helped them explore moral themes in more depth and to think about personal application to their lives—writing their responses further enhanced this process (Adams, 2007; Dana & Lynch-Brown, 1991; Entwistle, 2000; Kim, 2001; Lemming, 2000; McCune & Entwistle, 2000; Mills, 1988; Ryan & Bohlin, 1999; Scharf, 1978). Third, the instructor also took a depth-over-breadth approach by focusing on only a few works that students felt further helped them explore moral aspects of the literature more deeply. Finally, students explained that the instructor's prompt and honest feedback (Holmberg, 2003; Loui, 2005; Moore, 1997) contributed to seeing new perspectives, increased self-confidence, and increased open-mindedness.

Participants reported that the instructor's encouragement helped some toward becoming self-disciplined in their learning and more self-confident.

The Student–Instructor Relationship

Both the instructor and students suggested that the character building aspects of the course were strengthened by the student–instructor relationship. According to the students and the instructor, the strength of the relationship depended on the ways that the instructor connected with students, the nature of the feedback provided on assignments, and the open attempts to befriend students. For example, the instructor tried to connect on a more personal level with students by doing small things that make a big difference, such as greeting them, calling the students by name, “chatting in the margins with them about personal aspects of their responses” (personal communication, November 21, 2007), making additional contact through phone or email, and offering help to students if he can sense frustration, nervousness, or other needs on their part. He also placed great emphasis on open and honest feedback, stating, “I go out of my way to encourage [the students] to respond honestly and personally, and try to respond in kind” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). Likewise, one student expressed, “I know that he is reading [my assignments] and responding honestly. “Because of this, at least in my case, the instructor encourages honest thought . . . in my responses” (personal communication, March 1, 2008). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the instructor's relationship with the students was based on mutual trust and respect, resulting in friendship. This type of relationship was important to the instructor in order to “move from a hierarchical relationship to a personal one” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). This trust and respect resulted in students feeling free or safe to think for themselves and thus deepen their responses to the questions posed in the course. Describing the relationship, the instructor said, “Mostly it's just a matter of wanting to be friends with these great folks” (personal communication, November 21, 2007). And students reciprocate the friendship he offers them. As one student explained, “You almost felt like you were corresponding with a friend on a subject you both had interest in” (personal communication, July 19, 2007). In these ways, the student–instructor relationship rendered effective the more explicit character building aspects of the course.

Other Factors

The context of distance education, specifically independent study provided certain advantages that contributed to the development of character. These advantages included flexibility of time frame and location, student independence (Garrison, 2000; Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004; Wedemeyer, 1971, 1981), and student agency.

The flexible time frame and independent nature of the course requires students to discipline themselves. As a student commented, “[the 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. So I think it just encourages that self-initiative for character building” (personal communication, August 30, 2007). The students additionally perceived that the time flexibility and asynchronous nature of the course facilitated a deeper exploration of moral themes. The students also reported that the independent study context influenced the student–teacher relationship. Although there was little face-to-face or other synchronous interaction with the instructor, some students felt the course was more of a personal and direct discussion with the instructor than what they typically experienced in the classroom. The course context made the experience, as one student described,

“more personal and . . . more of a one-on-one experience” (personal communication, October 17, 2007).

Finally, students suggested that the emphasis placed on making choices and personalizing the course content influenced their character building: “I can analyze the works all day, but if I don’t personalize it or apply it then it won’t affect my character at all. It is when you apply it that it can affect your character” (personal communication, February 9, 2008).

In summary, students and the instructor perceived that the content, instructional conversation (including a helpful, trusting, and respectful relationship between the student and the instructor), and other factors (such as the flexibility of time frame and location, and student independence, readiness, and agency) both directly and indirectly influenced students’ character development.

Conclusion

Although some researchers suggest that character development in distance education is more difficult (Chachra, 2005; Huff & Frey, 2005), the findings in this article suggest that character development is not only possible in distance education, but also amenable to it. That is, this study suggests that aspects of the distance nature of the course seemed to enhance the character-building aims of the course. For example, the independent and asynchronous nature of the course and the flexible time frame contributed to students exploring moral themes in greater depth created an environment where students could grow in self-discipline, and helped contribute to a more personal and one-on-one relationship than typically experienced by the students in other courses—facilitating students’ deeper approach to learning and exploration of moral themes in the content of the course.

The character development reported in our previous paper (Johnson et al., 2010) and the approaches, instructional methods, and other factors reported in this article also suggest that character development in the context of higher education distance learning is often immanent in best practice instruction (see Lapsley, 2008). It proposes that teachers and instructional designers (a) encourage the exploration of moral- and character-related themes and issues inherent in their content; (b) engage students in conversation and promote deeper learning through offering choices, asking meaningful questions that invite students to apply personally what they are learning, writing for clarity and coherence, emphasizing depth over breadth, and providing prompt and helpful feedback, (c) build edifying relationships of trust, respect, and friendship with students, (d) leverage the distance education context to promote deeper learning and student responsibility, and (e) help students to consciously choose to learn and develop. However, more research is needed to see if these findings are applicable in other content areas and in other distance contexts.

This study also offers important insight into student perceptions of character development and approaches that encourage that development that have long been missing from the literature on character development and education (see Osguthorpe, 2009). It also makes a contribution to how literature can be used as a means of character development, but, most importantly, this study provides some possible lines of research related to character development in the context of distance education. These possibilities include: the importance of the student–teacher relationship and how that relationship obtains including the quality of communication that invites student responsibility and deep learning; the role of students in character development and how to help students take responsibility for such development; and the relationship between deep learning (see Entwistle, 2000; McCune & Entwistle, 2000) and character development.

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