

RESEARCH

Designing a Course for Lifelong, Self-Directed Character Growth

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we discuss how to create a course that helps students set a foundation for lifelong, self-directed character growth. To this end, we offer a new framework for character change which we call the 3M's for "mindset" (having a growth mindset for character growth), "motivation" (using psychological needs described in the Self Determination Theory, autonomy, competence, relatedness, and purpose), and "means" (tools for character development). We then give concrete examples of how each component of this framework can be used in a classroom setting to help students develop their character.

Keywords: Character, Virtue, Character Education, Higher Education

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present ideas on how to create a course that not only helps develop students' character in the short term, but also sets a foundation for life-long, self-directed character growth. Service academies have a core mission of developing leaders of character. Recently, there have been calls for institutions of higher education to focus on the character formation of their students (Bok, 2020) and initial work on the investigation of college level character education (Lamb et al., 2022). To accomplish the goal of our paper, we offer an organizing framework to prepare people for volitional character change – the 3M Framework. This framework, first introduced in Meindl and Dykhuis (2022), is grounded in the idea that successfully teaching for self-directed character growth requires (1) imbuing pupils with Motivation to be people of great character, (2) helping them build the right Mindset such that they ardently believe they can improve their character, and (3) teaching them the Means or tools that will allow them to continue to develop their character. In what follows, we provide background information on the 3Ms, along with specific examples of applications of each of the 3Ms. As an illustrative example of how the 3Ms may be applied in the classroom, we discuss a pilot character course recently carried out at the United States Military Academy (USMA) with a sub-section of first-year cadets.

Motivation

A course centered on facilitating character change should leave students more intrinsically motivated to be people of character. How can a character course do this? Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci, & Ryan, 2012) – arguably the preeminent psychological theory of intrinsic motivation – offers several ideas. SDT highlights three psychological needs that, when met, enhance intrinsic motivation: *Autonomy*, *Competence*, and *Relatedness*. In what follows, we will briefly discuss each of SDT's proposed needs, as well as the human need for *Purpose*. We touch on purpose

both because of its close relationship to SDT constructs (Weinstein et al., 2012) and its importance for motivation (Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009; Yeager et al., 2014). We will then offer examples of how all four of these needs can be satisfied in a character formation course, thus, we believe, heightening students' intrinsic motivation to develop their character.

Autonomy

According to SDT, autonomy is the psychological need to have the perception of choice or control (Deci & Ryan, 2012). When an individual is provided with the freedom to choose, their sense of intrinsic motivation is enhanced (Deci & Ryan, 2012). In a character course, giving students options, such as which aspect of their character they can focus on developing, who they can work on this endeavor with, and which practices they can apply toward this end (e.g. written journal reflections; meditation) may facilitate intrinsic motivation to become a person of character.

Competence

We are more intrinsically motivated to do things that give us a sense of mastery, expertise, or competence (Deci & Ryan, 2012). A survey course on world history is unlikely to develop a sense of expertise if each lesson is focused on important, but seemingly unrelated epochs in human history, especially if connections between the lessons are not made explicit. The same is true for a character course composed of discrete lessons that do not build on themselves (e.g. one day devoted to gratitude, another day focused on self-control, another on goal-setting). Instead, to develop students' sense of competence in the domain of character development, course material should build on itself, much like an elementary math sequence begins with addition and subtraction, and gradually builds to multiplication and division.

Relatedness

Relatedness refers to an individual's need to feel interpersonal connection. According to SDT, when a person

feels connected to another person through a task, or as the result of completing a goal, the individual is subsequently more intrinsically motivated to engage in that task (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Enabling students to work on their character together and helping them see how enhanced character leads to improved relationships, may intrinsically motivate them to work toward improving their character.

Purpose

Finally, connecting intermediate goals to one's supraordinate goal, or purpose in life fuels motivation for the former (Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009; Yeager et al., 2014). Studies with college students show that interventions designed to develop purpose can be effective (Bronk et al., 2019) and when implemented in a character education course, purpose interventions can help facilitate character formation (Mendonça et al., 2023). Thus, an instructor of a character course should work to teach their students how mastering course material might help them discover and/or reach some higher purpose in life.

Applications

There are many ways to apply SDT's insights to a character course. Here, we briefly share insights and strategies that have been implemented in a pilot character development course at USMA. In this course, we attempted to develop cadets' sense of character formation competence by guiding them through a sequential character formation curriculum. Cadets began by discerning what they considered to be their highest goal or purpose in life. They then decided what character trait to work on during the remainder of the year (thus satisfying autonomy needs) by determining which character trait would most strongly aid them in their attempt to achieve their supraordinate goal (hence satisfying "purpose" needs). Cadets were then taught a simple goal-setting strategy (see "goal-setting" under "Means" section below), and each week, cadets set a goal that would ultimately help them develop their target character trait. Cadets monitored their character goal progress through weekly

reflections and discussions with "Friends of Mutual Accountability" (explained further under the "Means" section) that they chose (providing another opportunity to not only satisfy the need for autonomy, but also relatedness, as we note further in the text).

In addition to applying SDT to our course, we also implemented discrete motivational practices. These included the use of relevant and attainable exemplars to inspire (Čehajić-Clancy & Bilewicz, 2021; Han et al., 2017; van de Ven et al., 2019), and "discrepancy awareness" activities (Allemand & Flückiger, 2017; e.g. asking cadets to think about how they would be remembered if they died today vs. how they want to be remembered).

Mindset

The second of the 3Ms is Mindset. Intentional change can be facilitated by a person's mindset or belief that they can change (Han et al., 2018). Here we briefly review two psychological concepts that relate to this orientation – self-efficacy and growth mindset. We then discuss how they can be developed in a character course.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, or the belief that one can attain one's goals, is critical for accomplishing what one sets out to do (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 1992; Van Dinther et al., 2011). An individual who believes they can perform a certain behavior – including positive character behaviors – when armed with the right character-building strategies (see *Means* section below), can develop the skills necessary to do so through persistent effort (Bandura, 2004).

Growth Mindset

A related but distinct concept is the growth mindset. Unlike self-efficacy, which focuses on one's belief in their own ability to accomplish a particular goal, growth mindset focuses on the notion that change is possible, not just for oneself, but in general (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). A hallmark of the growth mindset is the belief that effort

put forth can influence a trait or ability (Park et al., 2020). After all, if you do not believe you can change, why bother putting in the effort? Having a moral growth mindset, the belief that through effort, a person can become a morally better person (Han et al., 2020) has been shown to increase voluntary service engagement (Han et al., 2018).

Fortunately, a growth mindset is something that can be taught; interventions promoting growth mindset can influence the effort one puts into accomplishing a goal (Paunesku et al., 2015; Yeager et al., 2019). To develop a growth mindset, a person needs only to be offered evidence that they can in fact grow. There are at least two effective strategies for teaching someone that growth is possible: one anecdotal, another empirical. On the anecdotal side, there is reason to think that growth mindset can be developed simply by telling stories about redemptive figures – people who did not always act in exemplary ways but who changed their behavior for the better. These stories are inspiring (Klein & O'Brien, 2017), likely because they give people hope that they, too, can grow into exceptional people. Wise interventions designed to enhance growth mindset have long used stories of redemptive figures to convince people that change is possible (e.g. Blackwell et al., 2007).

A second strategy for developing a growth mindset is to simply offer empirical evidence that people do change. For instance, brief growth mindset interventions typically provide scientific facts about brain plasticity (Yeager et al., 2013, 2016). This teaches people that it is not only the case that people *can* change, but that change is a common occurrence in humans. It is written into our brains. Discussing evidence for personality and behavior change should be effective for the same reason.

Applications

To facilitate growth in self-efficacy, we took several steps to increase the likelihood that cadets in our pilot course would accomplish their character goals. They were taught a simple and effective goal-setting strategy

(see “goal-setting” in the “Means” section), were provided with opportunities to set their own character goals, and were encouraged to pursue these goals outside of class. Additionally, each week in class they were given time to reflect on their goal progress.

To promote a growth mindset, at the beginning of the course, we provided cadets with empirical evidence that people change throughout the lifespan. Cadets also reflected on their own past positive development and identified people in their lives who have demonstrated effective character growth. Finally, throughout the course we used videos and readings that introduced relatable exemplars who have demonstrated considerable character growth, often during emerging adulthood.

Means

A student who *wants* to be a person of character (i.e. they are motivated) and *believes* they can develop their character (i.e. they have the right mindset) still might not fully develop their character. To do so, they need to have the right tools, or “Means” to develop themselves. In this section, we highlight four means: reflection, emotion regulation, situational strategies, and character-related knowledge.

Reflection

Reflection – here, specifically thinking and/or journaling about components of one’s character journey – is a commonly used tool for character formation (Lamb et al., 2021), but not all forms of reflection are equally powerful. So, what does good reflection look like? We believe it involves thinking about the “*what*,” “*why*,” “*where*,” and “*how*” of one’s attempts at intentional character change (Johnson, 2020). What exactly does one aspire to be like? Why is this what they aspire to be and why do they not currently act this way? Where are they currently at on their road to good character? And how are they going to get where they want to go? It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all exercises that can

help people think through each of these components of reflection, but we will outline four especially efficient activities: values affirmation, self-monitoring, goal-setting, and plan-setting.

Values Affirmation. Values affirmation entails reflecting on one's personal values or goals, and then briefly writing about why one considers those values or goals to be especially important.¹ Research shows that values affirmation can increase myriad character-relevant qualities, including humility (Crocker et al., 2008; Ruberton et al., 2016), self-control (Schmeichel & Vohs, 2009), and prosocial behavior (Schneider & Weber, 2021).

Self-Monitoring. Empirical evidence demonstrates that for a litany of behaviors, simply monitoring one's behavior (also known as self-monitoring) is perhaps the most powerful behavior-change strategy available (Abraham & Michie, 2008). Why? There are many reasons, but one is that self-monitoring serves as a regular reminder of one's goals. Another reason for self-monitoring's effectiveness is that it likely motivates behavior change, either by showing people that they are effectively working toward their goals (thereby enhancing self-efficacy) or by revealing that they are not yet where they want to be. In these ways, self-monitoring helps address the "where" of reflection – where am I currently?

Goal-Setting. Simple goal-setting has been shown to be an important activity for promoting change (Epton et al., 2017). There are many useful goal-setting methods, but for simplicity's sake, we have created the "ABCS" of goal-setting. The ABCS system draws together the two components of goal-setting that research suggests are particularly important (Locke & Latham, 2006): a goal must be Attainable yet Bold (i.e. it must be difficult to accomplish), and it must be Clear yet Specific. As students progress through a character course, it might be

wise to introduce more complex goal-setting systems, but our experience is that the ABCS offer a practical jumping off point for people just starting to formally develop goals.

Plan-Setting. Goals alone will not lead to character change: they must be accomplished. To assist in goal-achievement, it helps to set a plan. One of the most effective techniques for plan-setting is WOOP (Oettingen & Reiningier, 2016). WOOP stands for Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, and Plan. Using this system, one first identifies a Wish or future they desire (i.e. their goal). They then imagine the optimal Outcome or feeling associated with reaching that future. Next, an Obstacle they may face on the path to this future is considered. They then create a Plan to overcome the obstacle (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Specifically, WOOP directs people to create an implementation intention: An "if/then" statement in which people report "If situation X arises, then I will Y." In part, implementation intentions draw their power from the fact that they succinctly encourage people to specify when, where, and how they intend to pursue their goal (Gollwitzer et al., 2010). Notably, implementation intentions have been successfully used to shape the character of emerging adults (Hudson & Fraley, 2015).

Though not a form of reflection, here we should note that mere reminders of one's character goals may also facilitate character formation (Buccioli & Piovesan, 2011; Mazar et al., 2008). This means that something as simple as setting a daily alarm to remind oneself of their goal can help a person develop their character. One potential weakness of this strategy, however, is habituation. If the content of the reminder (e.g. "Remember: Be Kind") and the timing of the reminder (e.g., every day at 7:30) remain the same, it will quickly lose its potency.

Emotion Regulation

Emotions play an outsized role in character, especially moral character (Haidt, 2001, 2003), because of their

¹ To access a pre-made Values Affirmation activity, go to https://characterlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/grit_myvalues.pdf or visit www.pztools.org.

tendency to drive behavior. Whether people are experiencing too many emotions, not enough, or not the right type, there are emotion regulation techniques that can help them. And in doing so, they will set a stronger foundation for character change. Two categories of emotion regulation practices that seem to be especially useful for character formation are meditation and gratitude-induction activities.

Meditation. Meditation is an internal process aimed at regulating attention and emotions for the purpose of enhancing equanimity, well-being, and character formation (Lutz et al., 2008; Sedlmeier et al., 2012; Willard, 1998). Contemporary types of meditation include mindfulness, transcendental, spiritual, and mantra. Meditation is known to improve psychological mechanisms fundamental to the development and enactment of character traits, including attentional control, self-awareness, and emotion regulation (Tang et al., 2015; Upton, 2017); it also directly impacts character by promoting self-control, prosocial behavior, prosocial emotions such as empathy and compassion (Kreplin et al., 2018; Luberto et al., 2018) and honesty (Feruglio et al., 2023). Forming a meditation habit is challenging, but fortunately there now exists a plethora of meditation apps (e.g. Healthy Minds, Headspace, Calm) that make it easier to create such a habit. The existence of these apps also means that character course instructors do not need to be meditation experts themselves to properly train students in meditation.

Gratitude. Perhaps the most efficient emotion-regulation activities for character are gratitude generators. Research shows that gratitude contributes to a host of character traits, including humility (Kruse et al., 2014), generosity (Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006), hope (Witvliet et al., 2019), and even self-control (DeSteno et al., 2019). Counting Blessings and Three Good Things activities (writing every night about three things one is grateful or thankful for, or three things that went well in their lives that day, respectively), are relatively quick,

painless, and powerful ways to generate gratitude. The Three Good Things activity is so powerful that it has been shown to increase happiness and decrease depressive symptoms for at least six months (Seligman et al., 2005).

Context

Environments influence behavior, so much so that some scholars suggest that their influence makes character irrelevant (Doris & Doris, 2002; Harman, 2009). According to these “situationists,” humans are almost entirely products of the situations they (a) have experienced in the past and (b) experience today. But even if environments did hold the lion’s share of influence over character (though see, for instance, Sabini and Silver (2005) and Fleeson (2001) for evidence that the importance of situations has been overstated), this would simply mean that the road to character change would go through efforts to change one’s environment. Or as the behaviorist B.F. Skinner once said, “Don’t try to change yourself, change your environment.” Here we discuss two strategies that students can be taught and that may help them harness the power of their environments to improve their character: situation selection and situation modification (Gross, 1998).

Situation selection involves choosing an environment that makes good character more likely. For example, if you do not want to binge on candy, do not have candy in your home. If it is impossible to give into a temptation, it is impossible to *not* act the way you want to act. Of course, sometimes tailoring your environment to your character-related desires is not practical. Perhaps, for instance, your spouse wants candy in the house. In this case, instead of making a behavior impossible, you can make it more difficult, through situation modification. For example, ask your spouse to hide the candy. The point is simply that to the extent that environments are malleable, altering them is an important strategy for reaching your best self. For this reason, we suggest having students consider how to alter their own

environments or set their own boundaries to support their character goals.

Knowledge

Lastly, we believe that students should be taught about a small set of concepts, theories, and models pertinent to character formation. For instance, students should be taught about the three main drivers of character formation outlined here – motivation, mindset, and means. Students should also understand the connection between character and future happiness. For example, evidence suggests that engaging in prosocial behavior such as donating time and money to others, increases positive affect and life satisfaction (Aknin et al., 2019). Not only is this information important and practical, but it is also simple and relatively enjoyable to learn. And by elucidating the connection between happiness and character, we suspect that many students will be more motivated to become people of character.

Applications

Early in our pilot character course, cadets completed a values affirmation activity to clarify what they considered of ultimate importance in life. They then set character trait goals that, if accomplished, would contribute to that which they ultimately value. Then each week in class, they were provided with time to (1) reflect on whether they accomplished their goals from the week before, (2) set or refine their goals, and (3) plan out how they would accomplish those goals.

Cadets also regularly practiced meditation, typically at the beginning of class. Instructors either used a pre-recorded guided meditation, or a meditation script provided for them. Cadets were shown empirical evidence that highlighted meditation's emotion regulation-enhancing capabilities and were encouraged to practice outside of class on their own. Finally, cadets discussed the power of environments and reflected on opportunities to select environments or modify them in ways that made it easier to accomplish their character goals.

Because friends are a powerful component of a person's social environment, one concrete way this was accomplished in class was through the selection of "Friends of Mutual Accountability." After cadets identified character traits to work on, set character goals, and chose their character friends, they met with them weekly to discuss their goal progress. By having friends in their immediate social context become aware of their goals, this more effectively positioned them to hold each other accountable for their character goal pursuits outside of class. Cadets were also provided with information about the connection between character and flourishing (such as the connection between virtues such as gratitude and positive psychological well-being outcomes), along with opportunities to write down and express what they were grateful for.

Conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to help administrators and educators develop a class that improves their students' character both now and in the future. In service of this goal, we offered instructors the 3M system. We then provided example activities that would help satisfy each of the 3Ms. Although many other strategies exist within each of these three bins, here we have focused on those that seem most effective and efficient. We should also point out that the 3M system not only provides a framework for designing a character growth class but also a structure for assessing the effectiveness of the course and the development of students (Meindl & Dykhuis, 2022). Our hope is that administrators and character educators can use ideas presented in this paper to help their students set a foundation for lifelong self-directed character growth towards a lifetime of flourishing.

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